

### Denaturalizing Climate Change: Migration, Mobilities and Space

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# Denaturalizing Climate Change: Migration, Mobilities and Space

Friederike Gesing, Johannes Herbeck, Silja Klepp

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## Introduction

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In early 2011, the popular German weekly *Der Spiegel* asked on its website: “Where are all the environmental refugees?” (cf. Bojanowski, 2011). It was referring to a prediction made in 2005 by the United Nations University (UNU) and the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) that warned of the existence of up to 50 million environmental refugees by 2010. *Der Spiegel* noted that, despite the doomsday prophecies of these UN agencies, there is no real evidence of changes in global migratory patterns and behavior, specifically in the form of growing migration rates in the context of climate change-related environmental change. In this article, *Der Spiegel* journalists picked up on a strand of debate that is being pursued in a number of different settings: the relation between global climate change and migration. For several decades, this debate has featured prominently in many contexts. It comes up regularly at international climate policy events (for example at COP 15 in Copenhagen) and also fuels public debates on potential societal impacts of global climate change. It is regularly referred to in mass media, as well as policy circles and public statements of politicians. At the same time, the issue has been subject to an intense debate in different scientific communities, from the natural sciences, to geography, the political sciences, and migration research.

The debate and its critique served as a starting point for conceptualizing a workshop entitled *Denaturalizing Climate Change: Migration, Mobilities and Spaces* that took place at the artec Sustainability Research Center, University of Bremen in October 2013. The aim was to revisit the nexus between climate change and human mobility, employing innovative and, above all, more politicized approaches. Among the broader debates on climate change adaptation, there is evidence of both over-politicization and a de-politicization of the far-reaching social, political and legal consequences of global climate change. On the one hand, research from various disciplines often focuses on the formal transnational negotiations and international climate policy institutions. This growing research field is, intrinsically, highly politicized. On the other hand, debates are de-politicized from a more theoretical point of view. Very often, questions on the social impacts of environmental change are detached from the political and social contexts in which those impacts come to play, and

from the debates around climate justice that infuse all climate change negotiations. In our view, environmental change is always simultaneously a natural and a social phenomenon. This applies both to the causes of change and to societal responses, including increasing mobility. In line with conceptual frameworks that refer to social natures (Castree & Braun, 2001) and the societal relationships with nature (Görg, 2004), we argue that it is important to consider the social constructions and cultural readings of environmental change. Specifically, our aim has been to analyze the evolving co-production of social order and natural order with respect to the relationship between environmental change and human mobility. In contrast, the current debates on growing refugee flows in the context of global warming often neglect or cover up this process of co-production and conceptualize nature as being detached from social and political processes.

## **Migration and climate change revisited**

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The term ‘environmental refugee’ was first coined by Lester Brown from the World Watch Institute in the 1970s (Boano et al., 2008). A broader debate about displacement due to climate change or, more generally, environmental migration was initiated in the 1980s, following the first use of the term in a UN publication in 1985 (El-Hinnawi, 1985; from Bates, 2002). Since then, the discussion has been taken up in academic circles, but has also been pursued in various other contexts, e.g. in international policy fora and among humanitarian organizations. Different strands of the debate have emerged, addressing questions such as how to classify different types of environmental migrants (Bates, 2002; Biermann, 2001; Jakobeit & Methmann, 2007), the expected extent of the phenomenon (Christian Aid, 2007; Myers, 1997, 2002), and the situation in international law (McAdam, 2011; McAdam, 2012; Docherty & Giannini, 2009).

Many of the individual strands of discussion have themselves given rise to controversies. More fundamentally, questions have been raised about *how* environmental changes affect migration events, and whether it is even reasonable to use environmental conditions to explain migration. This basic criticism has been present in the discussion from the start. For example, it featured prominently in a study commissioned by the United Nation High Commissioners on Refugees (UNHCR), which states that the term environmental refugees is “(...) unhelpful and unsound intellectually, and unnecessary in practical terms.” (Black, 2001, p. 1). It is argued that reducing migration decisions to responses to environmental factors neglects the interaction between the different cultural, political, and social factors which, in fact, form the basis of migration decisions, making it neither possible nor effective to consider these dimensions separately from each other.

In our view, the rationale for the dichotomization of environment and society in the presentation of environmental change as a push toward migration is doubtful (see, for example Nicholson, 2011). The rhetoric of climate induced flight, often in conjunction with violent conflict, abbreviates or covers up structural, political, and social root causes of both environmental degradation, and flight and migration. For example, with regard to slow-onset changes in the environment (e.g. soil impoverishment and desertification), and the related, presumed effects on migration events, Hartmann (2010) shows how the 'degradation narrative', that forms the basis of these scenarios, provides support for colonialist stereotypes of destructive cultivation practices, population explosion, and consequent conflict and migration. More recent concepts of nature as a "constantly evolving social and ecological product that is co-produced in myriad forms" (Piguet, 2013, p. 157), and other approaches that address the co-production of nature and society, have hardly been picked up by migration studies. The dilemma of how to integrate environmental factors in migration research without detaching them from the social context in which they appear could be solved by a convergence of newer concepts of human-nature relationships with migration studies. In this way, the impacts of material changes could be researched in light of their socio-cultural causes, perceptions and interpretations (Piguet, 2013, p.157).

Seen from a migration studies perspective, the rhetoric of environmental migration can be interpreted as pioneering a returning determinism in the explanation of migration patterns. Based on a simplified conceptualization of migration decisions, this determinism undermines recent developments in theories of migration that increasingly point toward multi-faceted cause-and-effect relations between individual agencies and structural factors. A deterministic approach neglects recent attempts to conceptualize migration as more independent from structural and economic pressures and frame it rather as a social movement or creative strength within a global economic system, as in the 'autonomy of migration' approach (Andrijasevic et al., 2005; Mezzarda, 2004, 2007; Moulier Boutang, 2007; Tsianos, 2007). In contrast, the environment/migration nexus presents structural conditions as quasi-compelling. Migration is conceptualized as being unavoidable, and independent of the agency of migrants. Moreover, the concept of climate justice that stresses the historical responsibility of industrialized countries for global emissions within the wider context of debates around postcolonial justice, resource distribution and identity, is scarcely mentioned in research and debates on climate change and migration. Recent research shows how discourses on climate change migration are increasingly aligned to climate change adaptation debates, treating migration as a problem to be addressed by development policies, and disaster management and risk reduction strategies (Bettini, 2013). The transfer of the issue into a developmental and humanitarian framework outsources the problems geographically and politically, and prevents the politicization of



the discourse (Klepp & Herbeck, forthcoming). The observable circumvention of political aspects by western development cooperation, which according to Ferguson (1990) often functions as an “anti-politics-machine”, allows concealment of questions of regional and global responsibility and solidarity, as well as historical and current power relationships and dependencies.

As outlined above, we believe that in face of the complex realities of global migration, the current debates on the environment/migration nexus are largely insufficient. They are marked by a deficient theoretical grounding, and a disregard of new trends in migration research and the wider political picture. Moreover, they can also trigger securitization concerns in the OECD world. Authors such as Gupta (2009), Hartmann (2010), or Herbeck & Flitner (2010) argue that discussions about migration as a consequence of climate change are a significant part of a broader securitization discourse, which depicts climate change as a growing threat to national security. This debate provides evidence of the potential widening of the already existing North-South divide in climate change politics.

Against this background, our aim is to reconfigure the debates on environmental change and migration in order to shed light on new societal and theoretical challenges. This requires innovative research perspectives and approaches that, for example, offer ways to re-conceptualize „locality, sociality and connectivity“ (Hastrup, forthcoming) in the context of global climate change. This is especially needed with regard to social processes in the making, for example emerging forms of political order, solidarity or formal law.

## **Workshop aims and proceedings**

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As an iconic representation of current globalized problems, climate change offers numerous opportunities for theoretical advances in different social science disciplines. Denaturalizing climate change, and thereby stressing the social *and* natural character of the phenomenon, gives rise to new questions and concepts. They relate, for example, to changing conceptions of nature in different ‘epistemic communities’ (Adler & Haas, 1992), and the effects of these changes on negotiation processes, power structures and the potential for conflicts.

The increasing complexity of decision-making processes, intensifying interactions between the global and the local, as well as dynamic technological and scientific developments create the need for new research approaches, with climate change potentially representing a ‘theory machine’ (Galison, 2003, Helmreich, 2011) to shed light on these processes. By gathering together empirical findings on some of these developments at the workshop, we hope to contribute to the new theorizations of the social consequences of global change currently emerging in different academic disciplines.

Our main aim at the workshop was to revisit the climate change/migration/conflict nexus with the help of new perspectives from two angles. Firstly, connections to debates on global justice and postcolonialism were regarded as central to counter the under-politicization of research on environmental change and migration. This perspective was also intended to offer insights for solidarity movements campaigning on issues relating to climate justice, migration and climate change policies. Secondly, the understanding of climate change as being necessarily co-constituted by natural and social processes (cf. Piguet, 2013; Hinchliffe, 2007; Castree & Braun, 2001) was seen as essential to overcome the dualism between the two spheres that is evident in the majority of current research. To this end, invitations to participate in the workshop were extended to scholars from various disciplines involved in research on the impacts of climate change on migration, mobility and conflict in different geographic contexts. The disciplines represented at the workshop ranged from Critical Migration Studies, Critical Geography and Cultural Anthropology to Science and Technology Studies.

In the workshop, five thematic areas were discussed in different panels. Panel 1, *Security/governmentality and climate change*, focused on discursive shifts in the debates on climate change-induced migration, especially with regard to its connection to broader notions like resilience, governmentality and adaptation. Panel 2, *Representations of climate change and mobility*, debated the science/policy interface: firstly in the context of climate science in the making and, secondly, with reference to climate change discourses in the Pacific. The third panel, *Negotiating images of climate change*, discussed visual representations of climate change induced migration, taking imaginative geographies of the Mediterranean and a photo exhibition in London as starting points. The fourth panel, *Translocality and space*, focused on questions of spatiality that emerge within the climate change/migration nexus. Different spatial or scalar questions were discussed, based on empirical research in Kenya, Pakistan and Tanzania. The final panel, *Agency, local scale adaptation, migration decisions*, was mainly concerned with empirical research in the Pacific region, focusing on the role of different conceptions and meanings of land, and the evaluation of organized, managed migration schemes in the region.

This publication consists of six of the eleven contributions and has been complemented by a paper on the discourses around legal protection of 'environmental refugees' by Marlene Becker. We have asked the panelists to shorten their papers to enable readers to gain an accessible overview of the workshop's contents and outcomes. We have also incorporated comments made by invited commentators during the workshop into the publication: a brief commentary can be found at the end of most papers.

## ***Denaturalizing climate change - major outcomes***

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The main lines of debate during our workshop can broadly be summarized as follows: First, the climate change/migration nexus has profound implications for postcolonial international relations. Second, changing power relations in the context of adaptation policies and broader climate change discourses on different levels are a crucial issue. Third, adaptation research has to pay more attention to recent debates in critical migration studies. Finally, the entanglement of the debates on environmental change and migration with more general concepts (adaptation/resilience) and their normative implications has to be carefully examined.

First, it was observed that against the background of climate change, new positions and perspectives in debates around North-South justice and postcolonial identities are emerging. Ever-closer entanglements and dependencies among different actors are producing new constellations of power. These have the potential to dissolve old dichotomies and challenge simplified images of victim and perpetrator in North-South relations. Traditional dividing lines in international relations may be reconfigured, as climate justice considerations potentially change negotiation positions. In this regard we identified a clear gap in many of the recent discussions on climate change and migration: The issue of changing power constellations and how elites and other groups can reinforce their positions *through* climate change discourses has hardly been addressed so far. Adaptation projects on the ground often serve to strengthen specific epistemic communities. The distribution of and access to resources linked to climate change adaptation projects can have striking effects, potentially reinforcing existing conflicts within communities and societies, and reproducing and cementing established power relations. The empirical research presented at the workshop demonstrated the decisive importance of local contexts for the interpretation of climate change discourses and understanding of climate change-related vulnerabilities.

A key conclusion of the second line of debate was that, due to their complexity, shifting power constellations within societies, and between countries of the Global South and the global North, have to be studied in a holistic, differentiated way. One example of the complexity of changing actor constellations are new coalitions between civil society, NGO and social movement representatives in the UN climate change negotiations, that challenge hegemonic climate change discourses and criticize the institutional setup in which climate policies are negotiated. To understand and analyze these fundamental shifts, approaches are needed that can grasp these complexities. In response to this challenge, participants at the workshop emphasized the need for innovative research perspectives that address the correlations and interdependencies between environmental and social

changes. Questions that were raised in this context included: How can issues related to shifting power relations and global climate justice be fruitfully integrated into research on anthropogenic climate change? To this end, which experiences and approaches can be usefully shared among academic disciplines? Where can we identify research gaps, open research questions or missing concepts? In addressing these questions, we discussed rights-based approaches, noting that, for example social movements for climate justice increasingly refer to multiple legal frameworks, including human rights, environmental law and the cultural rights of indigenous peoples. The possibilities of mobilizing different legal arguments in pursuit of claims, for example for more adaptation resources for people on the ground, should be carefully analyzed. The evolving legal framework mirrors normative shifts in the debates on anthropogenic climate change.

A third focus of the debates was the integration of critical migration studies into climate change debates. Migration theories influenced by emancipatory perspectives can help to reframe research on anthropogenic climate change and migration. They can fruitfully reset frames of migration research: mobility then appears as social practice, as ‘travelling idea’, or expression of culture and power. Approaches that draw on cultural relativism, particularly with reference to ideas about space and home, can likewise be very useful tools in critically framing adaptation research. This was illustrated by examples from the Pacific region presented at the workshop, which discussed interpretations of space that are informed by a variety of social relations, rather than accepting the nation state as a quasi-natural framework for analysis. Postcolonial research approaches were also widely discussed in the context of the Pacific region. A key concern was how researchers can productively accompany social movements asking for climate justice, such as the *Pacific Voyaging* movement, which campaigns for a new trans-Pacific solidarity and identity against the background of the effects of climate change. Participants asked: How can we develop new research perspectives appropriate to more flexible interpretations of space and home, and express postcolonial perspectives in different research contexts?

Finally, discussions at the workshop emphasized the need to carefully reflect on discourses, notions and concepts that feature prominently in current contributions to the debate on the climate change/migration. One example is the adaptation paradigm: It is of crucial importance to examine the different implications of this paradigm, and the side-effects of adaptation policies and projects, in order to shed light on how climate change discourses are a reference for different actors to reinforce or alter existing power relations. The extent to which this is possible without taking a clearly normative standpoint as a researcher was extensively discussed at the workshop. One opinion expressed was that in discussing different options for societies and policy, researchers should always

make their own position clear. These discussions focused on the important role of scientists in climate change debates and politics.

Another example is the concept of resilience, which is widely used in research on adaptation and environmental migration, and as a frame of reference for adaptation policies and projects. The workshop debated the extent to which this concept is relevant to the *agency* of affected people on the ground, or whether it is primarily informed by neoliberal rationalities, relating for example to the economic inclusion of environmental migrants in potential receiving countries. It became clear that a number of different interpretations and meanings of resilience are in circulation. These different meanings, and the likely effects and side-effects of their application in policy making, have to be closely analyzed. The workshop highlighted the striking variety of contexts in which the concept of resilience is applied. One example is its connection to a potential distinction between ‘convenient’ and ‘inconvenient’ adaptation: Only people whose age and education enable them to succeed on the international labor market would be ‘resilient’ and thus ‘legitimate’ migrants according to this rationality. The risk of a discriminating othering in the realm of environmental migration seems to be imminent. The question what will happen to the ‘others’ is left to speculation, as in the *Migrate with Dignity* strategy of the government of Kiribati, which helps mainly young, educated citizens of Kiribati to find seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand. Further research is required on the application of different concepts such as resilience, vulnerability and adaptation and their cultural, social and political implications and effects in a range of contexts.

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# Picturing the migratory other: photography, climate change, and the urban imaginary

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*Martin Mahony, King's College London*

## 1. Introduction

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The Museum of London, Autumn 2010: alongside exhibits which underscored the role of capital cities as storehouses of collective memory, national identity, and jingoistic futurism I found, in a darkened space, huge, backlit photographs hovering moodily over visitors' heads. Depictions of a future London ravaged by water, ice, heat, new industries, and more *people*. The ravaging was not exactly apocalyptic: photographs of present-day London had been thrown into montage with images of other times and places to create these collages of possible futures. Buildings were not overrun with tropical vegetation, but stood proud and intact in the water of the swollen Thames or amid the sand of a desertified Horse Guards' Parade. The uncannily familiar merged with the disarmingly strange. The overall impression was of a stoic city – resilient, adaptable, like the city narrated as a 'survivor' of the great fire of 1666 and the bombs of World War II.

## 2. Postcards from the Future

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*Postcards from the Future*<sup>1</sup> presented a range of possible urban scenarios under a changing climate. Alongside scenes of elemental inundation sat scenes of ecological modernization – of responses to climate change which mitigate and adapt to its effects through the deployment of sophisticated technologies while not fundamentally challenging capitalism's underlying social relations. Flag poles on the Mall are replaced by Union Jack-bearing wind turbines. Kew Gardens – a centre of botanical and ecological research – now hosts a nuclear power station, its domed form towering over suburban southwest London. Water turbines float next to the Thames Barrier, offering a visual marriage of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> To see the images, visit <http://www.postcardsfromthefuture.co.uk/>

Another grouping of images rehearse a familiar set of themes of urban decline<sup>2</sup>. We are offered a bird's-eye-view of Tower Bridge surrounded by ice skaters, their long shadows emphasising their diminutive stature next to the grandeur of one of London's most iconic structures. The contrasting of tiny human figures with huge expanses of ice and water has become a common feature of climate change imagery, with connotations of human fragility in the face of colossal natural forces (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2013). In 'Camel Guards' Parade' military horses have been replaced with camels, in an adaptation to London's newly warmed climate. Unlike the snowy vista of Tower Bridge, here a low-level perspective is offered of a hazy, early evening sky. The low angle positions the sky in a dominant position in relation to the human subjects of the image. Heat bears down upon the scene, dominating its sensual interpretation and lending context to the implied adaptive decisions of the military.

One image, 'London as Venice', recapitulates a common trope of flooded urban environments. The caption reads: "Like a modern day Canaletto, this disturbing yet strangely peaceful aerial view of a flooded Thames was inspired by shots of New Orleans submerged under the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina". From a vantage point above Westminster, the scene stretches away from the Houses of Parliament in the foreground in a north-easterly direction, taking in the City of London in the middle distance, with the horizon punctuated by the towers of Canary Wharf. The Thames has risen almost to the level of its bridges, yet the roads and parks of Westminster and the South Bank are inundated with water. The picture is serene – a low sun casts long shadows, and the pink-hued sky shows few clouds above the placid floodwaters.

Although denoted to be inspired by Hurricane Katrina, this kind of image has a long history. It was perhaps the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 which activated European fears of wholesale urban destruction. Earlier expectations of a repeat of the Biblical Flood were soon overtaken by scientific arguments about the possibility of meteorite strikes and tectonic movements causing the sea to rise and consume much of the Earth's inhabited land (Boia, 2005). Technological utopianism jostled with millenarian dystopianism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1905, Camille Flammarion published an article which described a marine invasion of France, illustrated with Henri Lanos' image of a submerged Paris (Figure 1). The traumas of the two World Wars in many ways confirmed the more pessimistic readings of the progress of European modernity. As environmental concerns began to take hold in post-war Europe, born of fears of nuclear catastrophe and industrial pollution, climate change began to occupy a discursive space left vacant by international war and Biblical prophecy.

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<sup>2</sup> Scenes of climate-change induced urban disaster are an increasingly common feature of the visual discourse of climate change. For example, clothing manufacturer Diesel produced a range of adverts in 2007 portraying their wares as 'global warming ready', with models arranged within iconic cityscapes transformed by climate change. See <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2007/diesel-global-warming-ready/>



Figure 1 : *Le Déluge de Paris. L'Opéra au fond de la mer* by Henri Lanos. *Je Sais Tout*, 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 1905

### 3. Postcards from a new city

The image of an inundated Westminster is echoed by an image of an inundated Buckingham Palace. Again, familiar street patterns are rendered strange by the encroachment of a new substance. This time, it is not water, but 'shanty houses', spilling away from the Mall in the foreground across Green Park and the grounds of the palace. Sample images of 90 Kenyan shanty dwellings were digitally manipulated to create this sea of, the caption claims, 20 million individual houses filling this once green space of west London. The artists make comments about the appropriation of private space for public usage, and point to the contrast with the portion of the palace's grounds still enclosed for the use of a single family.

The slum occupies a prominent place in contemporary imaginations of the urban future. Davis (2006) explicitly aims to re-cast urban futurism away from high-tech fantasies of ever-taller skyscrapers towards the inevitability of ever-expanding informal settlements deprived of basic services and vulnerable to disease, crime and natural hazards. The slum has come to be the tokenistic image of

the non-Western city, contrasted to the ideals of rational planning and architectural formalism (Scott, 1998). In the image of the 'Buckingham Palace Shanty', the slum is denotatively and connotatively transported from the cities of the Global South to the very heart of Great Britain's centre of power, wealth and privilege. It is a juxtaposition which seeks to lay bare some of the contradictions and injustices of capitalist social relations, but one which also reinforces the implied functions of these different modes of habitation. London's past and current status as a centre of migration and cosmopolitan exchange is downplayed in favour of a cruder form of encounter between peoples and ways of life – British monarchy meets slum-dwelling migrant.

In 'Trafalgar Square Shanty' the artists appropriate the fame and iconicity of Trafalgar Square to further emphasise the potential for transformation in the urban fabric. Images of "street life in Kenya and covered souks in Morocco" are used to frame Nelson's column, a piece of military remembrance which here recedes into the background. The artists emphasise this denotation in the caption, leaving its connotations of changing senses of national memory and identity to the imagination of the viewer. The population of London has swollen such that its open spaces are transformed into new kinds of settlement, radically distinct from that which would be permissible under current legal, political and cultural arrangements. In this image we are offered a street-level perspective which takes us into the heart of the shanty settlement. We would be face-to-face with its inhabitants were they not consumed with their own activities. In another image – 'The Gherkin' – we are offered a close-up of one of London's most iconic skyscrapers, Sir Norman Foster's 30 St Mary Axe in the heart of the city's financial district. Using images of tenement blocks in Sao Paulo and Hong Kong, the artists recreate the so-called 'Gherkin' as a home to impoverished families improvising accommodation behind the crumbling facade of this former beacon of international finance. Behind the grubby glass hang curtains and drying clothes, "the signs and minutiae of life" that individualise "the otherwise uniform setting". Like the preceding two images, a theme of overpopulation – measured against contemporary, tacit understandings – is woven through this redesignation of urban space. Although the stated aim is to individualise, the image again trades upon a literally faceless mass.

The images I have discussed so far offer themes of both shifting weather and shifting people. In 'Parliament Square Paddy Fields' this entwining of climate and human mobility is further explored, in the context of an image of Parliament Square draped in fog and home to a number of urban farmers cultivating rice, the Palace of Westminster reflected in the pools of muddy water. The image is inspired by "an environmental project in East Asia during which Europeans were taught to plant rice". Recognisably 'European' arms reach down into the soil, while next to them a troupe of water

buffalo toils in the mud. The implication is that the usages of urban space have been radically rethought in the context of a “new global economy”, while shifting climatic patterns have enabled (or required) agricultural practices to migrate across the globe along with their associated forms of technology and labour. Transposition and juxtaposition again work in tandem to connote shifts in the spatial cultures of the city and to dramatise the potential for epochal transformations in contemporary urban orders.

#### 4. The spatial sovereignty of climate

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*“...after millions of years of progress, climate retains its sovereignty.”*

(Lucian Boia, *Weather in the Imagination*, p. 144)

The *Postcards from the Future* do not present an apocalypse as such, but do present shifting forms of modernity – assemblages of weather, people, social practices and material spaces which have undergone radical dislocation. The *Postcards* could be said to represent a distinctly cultural understanding of space as a dimension of alterity and difference, with place constituted at the intersection of diverse socio-cultural trajectories (Massey, 2005). Yet the spaces represented in and by the *Postcards* are oddly static. In working with the idea of a ‘postcard’ and its history as a “travelling landscape-object” (Della Dora, 2009) designed to capture the essence and iconicity of a place, the artists sought to engage directly with present-day viewers’ own senses of London and its identities. The transposition of particular assemblages was thus depicted through forms of juxtaposition, with ‘old’ London still very much recognisable beneath the layers of posited transformation. The juxtapositions were intended to make political arguments about the partition and striation of urban space – a rhetorical function deployed alongside the ambition to raise concerns about the effects of climate change more generally. But these juxtapositions rely on essentialising identities. In the case of the depiction of novel forms of human settlement, an othering is achieved and confirmed by the juxtaposition of these new forms with iconic London spaces. The present forms a bedrock of cultural order and urban stability in advance of a threshold of change, disorder and alterity.

It is not just people who have moved, it is climates. In the *Postcards* we are not simply presented with the effects of a linear temperature increase on present-day practices of London life. Rather, climate change brings new climates – the climates of the desert or of the paddy field. Zonal understandings of climate have historically been closely interrelated with attempts to explain variations in human culture, intelligence and physical productivity. From Hippocrates to Huntington, climate has been positioned as a determining factor for modes of human existence. Such arguments

were mobilised to explain the inherent superiority of European civilization during the age of imperial expansion, and claims about “tropical-nastiness” (Blaut, 1993, p. 70) and the inherent bountifulness and/or scarcity of tropical environments were used to justify colonial exploitation even amid fears about the effects of such climates on the health of European explorers, traders and colonists. Throughout this period, climate was imbued with a certain sovereignty – a power to determine, to regulate, to define the possible.

This sovereignty is inherently spatial. It is tied to particular locations and regions, terrains and territories. Hulme (2011) suggests that this sovereignty is manifest in current debates about climate change in the form of “climate reductionism”, by which understandings of society-climate relations are reduced to the calculations and inferences of global simulation models. Both determinism and reductionism are apparent in debates about climate change-induced migration (CCIM). Deterministic relations have been assumed (and reductively computed) between changes in climate and the will or need to migrate, despite evidence that climatic changes may equally lead to socio-spatial stasis and immobility (Foresight, 2011). In *Postcards from the Future*, the spatial sovereignty of climate is assumed in the form of implied migration not only of a ‘tide’ of people, but of ways of inhabiting particular climates which are then transposed to London as the mercury rises. The othering of climates proceeds in lockstep with the othering of the new migrants.

Climate change communicator George Marshall railed against *Postcards from the Future* as “dangerous” fantasy which would only fuel existing prejudices (*The Guardian*, 27 October 2010). Echoing Jenkins' (2007) concerns about journalistic portrayals of Hurricane Katrina feeding into and reinforcing existing interpretive schemas rather than challenging them, Marshall questions the wisdom of the kind of interpretation-structuring attempted by the *Postcards* artists. He asks “why did the cover story of ‘climate change’ permit the enthusiastic promotion of images and language that would be normally considered unacceptable in a public exhibition?...[Climate change] requires the same intelligence and sensitivity as any exhibition on gender, race or class”<sup>3</sup>. The lack of such sensitivities in *Postcards from the Future* highlights the construction, identified elsewhere in the debate (e.g. Baldwin, 2013; Bettini, 2013), of depoliticised migrants or refugees denied specific subjectivities. Yet it also brings to light the ease with which scientific constructions of climate change become devoid of localised forms of meaning (Hulme, 2010; Jasanoff, 2010). The subsequent downscaling of climate projections to scales of local decision-making does little to re-invest the

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<sup>3</sup> In the same article, the policy director of the UK Refugee Council called the images “lazy and unhelpful”. They were similarly condemned as “cheap stereotypes”, “inaccurate” and “insulting” by other refugee and climate change campaigners.

‘climate’ with the complex interpenetration of meaning and materiality which characterises everyday experiences of the weather, the city and of cultural difference.

Artists have commonly been at the vanguard of efforts to both document and foresee disaster (Boia, 2005). As Gabrys & Yusoff (2012, p. 14) illustrate, the arts have the aptitudes necessary for exploring the cognitive and normative contours of shifting human-nonhuman assemblages, and for making “generative and integrative proposals for a warming world”. Artistic practice can reinvest forms of meaning and affect into epistemic constructions devoid of situated relevancies (Hulme, 2010). But recognising these creative practices of the future-conditional as *political* negotiations of the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2006) means interrogating their (re)articulations of discursive structures which may be antithetical to a societal engagement with climate change and human mobility that emphasises justice, equality and democracy, and which may contain within it the seeds of more radical transformations of spatial relationships. Representations of CCIM have thus far recapitulated dominant discourses of alterity, climatic determinism and urban decay. Climate change has re-energised imaginations of urban decline and of an imminent ‘human tide’. It is vital to further explore why and how these discourses intersect in “an ambiguous time between present and future, and an ambiguous space between order and disorder” (Baldwin, 2013, p. 1474).

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# Deciphering migration in the age of climate change. Towards an understanding of translocal relations in social-ecological systems

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## 1. Introduction

*“It is not sufficient to simply blame environmentalists for their oversimplified vision of migration. Rather, it is up to migration scholars (...) to attempt to reembed environmental factors into their own theoretical framework while avoiding naive neodeterminism.”*  
(Piguet, 2012, p. 156)

Talking about migration and human-environment relations in times of globalization and climate change is a highly relevant but also difficult venture. The debate usually takes place in a blurred field between science, media and politics. Since its beginning, numbers have played a crucial role (Jacobson, 1988; Myers, 2002) and the first attempts to grasp the issue were rather deterministic and unidirectional. The tug of war between alarmists and sceptics has dominated the scientific debate. Whereas the alarmists try to show a causal link between climate change and migration, conceptualizing climate-related migration as an almost inevitable emergency response (Bogardi & Warner, 2009). Based on empirical case studies (see Morrissey, 2011, & Obokata et al., 2014, for an overview) the sceptics deny direct causal relations between environment and migration, and criticize the “shaky empirical character and sloppy nature” (Piguet, 2012, p. 155) of the alarmist assumptions. Several authors argue from a discursive perspective, asking about whose interest the environmental migration narrative serves and what effects it has, while pointing to the hegemony of the discourse and the role played by power relations (e.g. Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Bettini, 2013).

Since the advent of a critical view of climate change and migration, it seems that scholars increasingly refrain from drawing links between environmental change – including climate change – and human migration in order to avoid the geo-determinism trap. However, we start from the assumption that human-environment relations are intimately coupled, i.e. that “people and nature interact reciprocally and form complex feedback loops” (Liu et al., 2007, p. 1513), and argue that the heated debate should not prevent us from scrutinizing the complex nature of these interrelations (see also

Piguet, 2012). In this working paper, we explore a way to progress beyond a geo-deterministic, unidirectional, and causal perspective on environment and migration without neglecting the prediscursive materiality of space and environment. We argue that this can be realized by combining on a conceptual level the discussion of two broad topics that even today remain largely unconnected: translocality and Social-Ecological Systems (SES) approaches.

## **2. Scales, networks and migration in social-ecological systems**

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The role of migration for sustainable resource management has long been neglected in Social-Ecological System (SES) research. Netting's (1990) critical review of his own seminal study on the ecology of Swiss mountain farming (Netting, 1981) provides a telling example. In this work, Netting admits that he barely considered linkages to the world outside the alpine setting, such as migration, which – as he came to realize later – was an important 'safety valve' in balancing the fragile alpine environments. The neglect of outside linkages, he writes, was due to an overemphasized notion of closed community boundaries, of small and locally bounded sets of interaction. Pre-spatial-turn case studies, such as Netting's *Balancing on an Alp* (1981) largely informed Ostrom's "design principles" for successful Common Pool Resource Management (1990), in which sustainable institutions are considered to be facilitated only through the establishing of clear boundaries for resource systems' user groups and decision-makers. In this perspective, migration and scale-transcendent interactions potentially disturb sustainable institutional arrangements and weaken social bonds, trust relations and reciprocity, and thus threaten the functioning of the SES (Anderies et al., 2004). Such perspectives have contributed to the conception of migration as an outcome of a failed in situ adaptation, as part of a vicious cycle of impoverishment that ultimately leads to resource degradation (e.g. O'Keefe, 1983); or, in more recent discussions, as a threat to environmental security (Warner et al., 2009; Myers, 2002).

During recent decades, resilience and related concepts, such as adaptive cycles, multi-stable states, panarchy, nested scales, and response diversity, have become popular to describe complex SES (Folke et al., 2010). These concepts urge us to understand the complexity and the dynamics of human-environment interactions in a more comprehensive way, and address linkages across scales explicitly as important elements for the functioning of SES. As such they generally also place more emphasis to the influence of social networks on the adaptive management of natural resources (Bodin et al., 2006; Pelling & High, 2005; Rodima-Taylor et al., 2012 ; Tompkins & Adger, 2004). While not addressing migration directly, Tompkins and Adger (2004, p. 2), for example, point out that the "extension and consolidation of social networks, both locally and at national, regional, or international scales, can contribute to increasing ecosystem resilience". Scheffran et al. (2012, p.

119) assert that “migrant social networks can help to build social capital to increase the social resilience in the communities of origin and trigger innovations across regions by the transfer of knowledge, technology, remittances and other resources” (see also Rodima-Taylor et al., 2012). In a more nuanced appraisal, Bodin et al. (2006) elaborate on the effects of different structural properties of networks (e.g. reachability, density, betweenness) on the features identified as important for the adaptive management of natural resources (e.g. social memory, heterogeneity, learning, redundancy, trust). Their assessment indicates the multifaceted nature of these relationships.

In this vein we argue that it is a severe shortcoming to consider migration merely as a negative response to environmental pressure or climate change. Research must include the full range of aspects of the environment/migration nexus, including the potentials and potentially positive effects of human mobility and networks. This relationship, however, remains empirically under-researched and most conceptual frameworks lack explanatory capacity with regard to the multifaceted and often neglected environmental impacts of migration, particularly with respect to the emergence, dynamics and functions of migrant networks and the consequences of simultaneity and the multi-local embeddedness of the actors involved.

### **3. The emerging concept of translocality**

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In the course of widespread migration flows and multiplying forms of mobility (UNDP, 2009; Hannam et al., 2006), the connectedness of people and places to multiple and often distant localities intensifies (Zoomers & Westen, 2011). Migration, though not the only means (e.g. media, information and communication technology), is an important one through which these networks and connections are established, and which facilitates the flow of both material and immaterial resources and ‘social remittances’ (Dietz et al., 2011; Levitt, 2001; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). To better understand the multi-local embedding of actors and livelihoods, and to conceptualize their multiple interactions with the environment, the newly emerging concept of translocality provides a promising research perspective (Steinbrink, 2009 ; Brickell & Datta, 2011 ; Hedberg & Do Carmo, 2012 ; Oakes & Schein, 2006 ; Freitag & Von Oppen, 2010 ; Zoomers & Westen, 2011 ; Müller-Mahn & Verne, 2012; Islam & Herbeck, 2013).

Conceptualizations of translocality usually build on research into migration networks and remittances, particularly on insights from transnationalism (Smith, 2011) and seek to overcome some of the conceptual limitations of this well-established research perspective. Notably, translocality stands for the expansion of the analytical focus beyond the limits of the nation-state by focussing on various other dimensions of border transgressions. Socio-spatial configurations beyond those

induced by human migration are accounted for, such as symbolic flows, memories or what Brickell and Datta (2011, p. 18) refer to as “translocal imagination”, and immobile populations are integrated into a more holistic, actor-oriented and multi-dimensional understanding of social-spatial interdependencies and simultaneities. Furthermore, most scholars of translocality question the overemphasis on deterritorialization and fluidity of social spaces as described by the approaches of transnationalism (Pries, 2003). Migrants and actors do remain anchored at specific localities, or, as Brickell and Datta (2011, p. 3) put it, there is always some degree of situatedness, even during mobility. Even though concepts of translocality do not deny the blurring of borders in times of globalization, they plead for a more nuanced view of the role of space, place and borders, and bring the significance, materiality and uniqueness of locality back into the debate.

The idea of translocality is increasingly being used as an umbrella-term (e.g. in Freitag & Von Oppen, 2010) and therefore often lacks conceptual clarification (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013a). Given the brevity of this working paper, we limit this section to our own conceptualisation and usage of the term. In our attempts to develop the notion of translocality more specifically in order to apply it to empirical data on migration in Namibia (Greiner, 2010 ; Greiner, 2011), Kenya (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013b), Bangladesh (Peth & Birtel, 2014, forthcoming) and Thailand (Sakdapolrak et al., 2013), we have conceptualized translocality as a form of spatial structuration (Giddens, 1984; Pred, 1984). Starting from an actor-oriented focus on the social production and reproduction of spatial interconnections, we particularly emphasize three dimensions of translocal structuration, namely place, networks, and trans-locales (see Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013b, p. 538):

- (1) Place: Places are conceived of as dynamic, multidimensional and historically specific nodes where “local-local negotiations” between actors are grounded (Brickell and Datta 2011: 10), and where migrant networks are rooted and flows converge. The structuration approach thereby enhances a more explicit discussion of the temporal dynamics, and interconnections of places (see Leach et al., 1997, on the structuration of landscape).
- (2) Networks: Migrant networks are crucial for exchange and communication: they are considered as outcomes of, as well as a precondition for, translocal practices. Networks are structured by the actions of the people involved, and at the same time provide a structure for those very actions and practices (Steinbrink, 2009). They allow the flow and circulation of resources, information and commodities, as well as social remittances of ideas, practices and identities (Levitt, 2001).

- (3) Trans-locales: Locales are the settings for social interaction (Giddens 1984). Migration, as a process of “time-space distancing” (Giddens, 1984, p. 171), expands locales beyond places. Routine activities through which migrants and non-migrants interact across space eventually transform locales into *translocales*. These translocales provide the context and setting for action that is extended and increasingly influenced by remote interaction. The sketched translocal structuration process, which puts strong emphasis on local-local interactions, is nested in a multiplicity of higher-level dynamics beyond the immediate translocal scale, such as national policies, global economies, or climate change. In other words, “the global is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations rather than something monolithic or external to them” (Marcus, 1995, p. 102).

By connecting networks and places and emphasizing their fusion into translocales, our concept of translocality draws attention to the transformative character of local conditions and allows for the integration of physical and natural environments without essentializing them. As such, translocal research can engage in the discussion of global environmental change and strengthen the importance of the mobility of people, concepts and resources within this debate.

#### **4. Challenges and opportunities of translocal SES**

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We argue that bringing the concepts of SES and translocality together is a fruitful step toward understanding migration in the age of climate change without getting caught in a neo-deterministic frame. In our view, two major gains arise from this synthesis.

First: The social-ecological systems perspective conceives of the ecological and social as integrated subsystems, “[...] in which some of the interdependent relationships among humans are mediated through interactions with biophysical and non-human biological units” (Anderies et al., 2004, p. 3; see also Resilience Alliance, 2008). SES are intricately coupled and complex (Crumley, 1994; Turner II et al., 2003), i.e. there exist strong mutual feedbacks between system elements and across scales (Becker & Jahn, 2006). In conceptualizing migration as a specific empirical example of coupled social-ecological systems, it becomes essential not only to consider the effects of environmental change on migration, but also to comprehend the feedback processes of migration on the environment.

Second: The translocal perspective emphasizes the connectedness of people across localities. Flows of resources, information, knowledge and other forms of social remittances are at the centre of the translocality approach. By adopting a translocal perspective on ‘environmental migration’, out-

migration is not conceived as a process whereby actors are leaving the setting of social interaction, but rather as an expansion of this very setting. In doing so, the analysis has to take into account the feedback processes that can influence the environment and the ways in which actors deal with environmental stress across spatial scales.

To sum up, the SES perspective gives us the opportunity to consider the feedback relations between the social and the environmental subsystems. The concept of translocality helps us to focus on feedback processes across different scales and translocales. These opportunities also pose some challenges, however. While it is, for example, a mere terminological exercise to label human-environment relations as coupled, the great empirical task for future research will be to describe and analyse how the coupling and decoupling of subsystems emerges and how this relates to scale-transcendent feedback processes. Another challenge is the significant scale mismatch between SES and translocality. Whereas SES systemically conceptualizes scale in the sense of hierarchically nested levels, the translocal approach interprets scale in terms of networks that are socially produced, emergent, inherently fluid and constantly reworked. The latter approach thus challenges the notion of boundaries as applied in many established conceptualizations of SES. Taking up this challenge means that we must accept that in the social realm, system boundaries are always politically constituted and often blurred. Impacts on the SES, such as climate change (CC), emerge at different scales with different intensities and different characteristics. The idea, concept or discourse of CC is widely shared at the global level (Weisser et al., 2014), but the specific geo-bio-physical impacts of CC itself are mostly experienced and perceived on a very local level, e.g. fields with hail damage, or areas affected by floods. Local actors increasingly refer to notions of global rules or legally binding frameworks, while global media e.g. use localized cases, such as Tuvalu, as a “laboratory and a litmus test for the effects of climate change on the planet” (Lazrus & Farbotko, 2012, p. 385). Migration decisions in this context are taken in reference to these multidirectional and cross-scale processes, and contribute in themselves to the increasingly multi-scalar settings of social-ecological systems. From our point of view, the challenging and questioning of the notion of clearly defined and hierarchically ordered scales, such as global, national, regional and local, is a step towards a more nuanced way of understanding the migration/environment nexus.

## 5. Conclusion

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The advent of critical views of the nexus between climate change and migration has prompted a prolific debate on the difficulties involved in examining this complex issue. We have argued that it is not sufficient to criticize the earlier simplistic approaches to ‘climate migrants and environmental

refugees'. We must go a step further and provide alternatives that help us to improve migration theories and concepts, in particular by including more accurate accounts of social-ecological interrelations. The challenge for migration researchers is to do so in a way that goes beyond the neo-determinists' agenda, yet acknowledges the materiality of the environment (Piguet, 2012). In short, a conceptual framework is needed to guide future empirical research on the environment-migration nexus.

We have argued that combining concepts of SES with the approach of translocality provides a promising yet challenging way toward such a framework. Translocality will be particularly helpful in examining the feedback of migration dynamics on the environment as well as on communities dealing with environmental changes. This will significantly enhance our comprehension of trans-scalar dynamics on complex SES and bring us forward in understanding the complexities of human-environment relations in the age of climate change.

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## Comment

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The authors' starting point in this paper is the reference to the dominant argumentative figure in the debates about climate change and migration: the causal relation between the two phenomena. Both on the sides of 'alarmists' and 'sceptics', the authors see a uni-directional causality between climate change and migration in effect by either confirming or denying it. This being the case, the authors plead for understanding the relation between climate change and migration as a more complex phenomenon. To do so, they introduce the concept of translocality to Social-Ecological System research. Greiner, Peth and Sakdapolrak point out that migration is not only "a negative response to environmental pressure or climate change", but that it constitutes a complex arrangement of places, networks and translocales.

The concept of translocales is the crucial point in argumentation as it is here where social and environmental aspects of climate change-induced migration fall together. It allows to also integrate those places and people that are not directly affected by climate change in the research and to trace the global picture of mutual relationships and networks.

In their current conceptualization, translocales help to generally uncover the multidimensionality of migration processes, regardless of any climate phenomenon. The authors' approach is a promising attempt to show in what respect the concept of translocality, combined with SES, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of climate change and migration. Potential approaches derived from this combination are sketched out in this conceptual paper, but still need to be substantiated in future research. It is already clear that one contribution could be that rethinking the debate in this sense could shift the focus to more indirect consequences of climate change-induced migration and thus broaden the perspective on its global social, ecological, and spatial effects.

# The cultural space of climate change, adaptation, and mobility in the Pacific Islands

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## 1. Introduction

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Climate change and climate induced mobility are popular and over-politicized, yet under-theorized topics (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 1). Climate change has been named the biggest driver of future human mobility and an increasing amount of scholars are looking into the significance of 'nature' in migration decisions. The Pacific Islands serve as stage for this pending humanitarian catastrophe: much is written about 'the islands', ignoring that they each come with a distinct set of ecological, cultural, social, historic, economic, and political factors, all substantially influencing a society's response to changing environments. In addition, the two spheres 'nature' and 'society' are mostly treated as distinct and separate realms. Societal-medial doomsday scenarios take up a naturalizing discourse, while recent research in the academic humanities tends to de-naturalize the debate and views climate change as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The perception of and the coping with environmental changes are shaped by common ideas about what is believable, desirable, feasible, and acceptable (Roncoli et al., 2009, p. 87). Thus, any examination of how people adapt and whether mobility is successful or a failed adaptability has to start with looking at existing management systems and with understanding the social structure behind them (O'Collins, 1990). In the Pacific, this system is much defined by spatial notions of the islanders, where place and movement, but also 'nature' have a very different significance from Western ideas.

## 2. Moorings and movement in Oceania

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In Chuuk, one of the four federated states of Micronesia in the central Carolines, the spatial relation of staying and leaving is expressed in the gendered concept of *feefinitiw* (women stay on the land) and *mwááninó* (men go away), a metaphor which will be used here to describe the cultural space of adaptation and climate induced mobility.

## Island life – the mutuality of vulnerability and resilience

In matrilineal Chuukese society, women are the rightful owners of the land (*feefinitiw*). Part of this property is connected genealogies, related knowledge, stories, and songs. When a mother transfers land to her daughters, she reinforces the family's legacy to which her grave is the solid reminder. Micronesian culture and identity are formed by notions of belonging to land and people. The past, the present, and the future are seen as a continuous cycle which is repeatedly manifested, for example through the consumption of local food – planted by ancestors. Thus, 'land' has to be understood in the same social function as 'nature'. That is, the natural dimension of land offers dwelling and food, but it also grounds the people in their collective and individual sense of belonging.

The Pacific Islands are volatile in shape and have a transient existence, determined by tectonic and associated volcanic processes, by long- and short-term climatic variations, and not least by human engagement. From the very beginning of human presence, people in this 'extreme' environment have had to respond to environmental transformations.<sup>4</sup> Long before adaptation as "the fundamental conjunctive concept in human-environmental relations" (Oliver-Smith, 2009a, p. 12) became the credo of climate change impact studies, Oceania has been a pioneer region for studying this relationship. Some saw the lush tropical islands as "sites of resilience" (Campbell, 2009), while others focused on the limitedness of resources and on the lack of alternatives. Early cultural ecologists studied indigenous rituals and cultural practices which aimed at keeping the human-nature equilibrium. Of those, the work of Roy Rappaport (i.e. Rappaport, 1967a; Rappaport, 1967b), based in Papua New Guinea, has had the deepest impact. It was cited by Peter Timmerman (1981), who set a trend of current climate change impact research in linking the concepts of vulnerability, resilience, and climate change.

By now, adaptation has been defined in a plethora of ways. The participants of a workshop on 'Ethnographic Perspectives on Resilience to Climate Variability in Pacific Island Countries', defined adaptation as "a social response to stress, perceived stress, or anticipated stress" (Barnett & Busse, 2001, p. 29). It is guided by cultural perceptions, values, and norms and is therefore doomed to fail if action is not generated, motivated, and implemented by people in their own cultural and social setting, and if people are not empowered in their "needs, rights, and values" (Ibid., p. 17). Many traditional coping strategies were altered or ousted by colonial history. Colonial administrations used natural calamities to legitimize and consolidate their targets of economic development, often leading to a "second disaster" (Oliver-Smith, 2009b). Massive imported food and material supplies replaced well adapted traditional structures of self-reliance and made the islanders largely dependent on

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<sup>4</sup> See the Pacific Islands Regional Climate Assessment for a detailed report on climate change impacts (Keener et al., 2012).

outside help. Nowadays, new material demands put additional pressure on natural resources, such as mangroves and fish which are transformed into soap, store-bought food, or gas. Coastal resilience is thereby diminished by often unsustainable harvest methods such as excessive timber logging or dynamite fishing.

### **The emergence of climate refugees**

While the women stay on the land, Chuuk's "men go away" (*mwáánninó*) to fish, raid, or trade. Mobility is intrinsic to livelihoods in the liquid geography of Oceania, and current migration practices are a continuation of pre-contact journeys in order to obtain and bring back life sustaining resources, enlarging the "sea of islands," successfully adapting to new circumstances (Hau'ofa, 1994). With access to U.S. social welfare and health care through the Compact of Free Association, Chuuk islanders emigrate in growing numbers (Hezel, 2013, p. 38). They establish themselves on bigger islands (Guam and Hawaii) or on the Pacific Rim. Yet, connections between the place of origin and the transnational home remain, because leaving is hardly ever seen as an absolute, irreversible motion. In traditional voyaging, when setting course, instead of looking ahead to where the navigator was sailing to, he would align the canoe to the island he was leaving behind. Metaphorically, it also reminds people not to forget where they come from: if they orient themselves to their islands, they will move forward in life. Accordingly, what frightens Micronesians most is to be *pasónó*, drifting in unfamiliar waters, where no memory guides their action (Peter, 2004, p. 273). Memories and nostalgic images are also an important part of the Chuukese living abroad and they fondly remember moonlit beaches and indulge in food sent from home. Thus, movement is a "social and cultural act" (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009, p. 3), overcoming geographical borders and colonial concepts such as 'smallness' and 'isolation', representing instead a dynamic and mutual set of mobilities and moorings.

Images of people carrying their limited belongings on top of their heads while wading through what seems to be irreversibly flooded land have become strong symbols of what is to come with the warming of the world. Environmental change has become the new migration paradigm. Within it, alarmist scenarios (or maximalists) portray 'nature' as an overpowering destructive force which subdues human societies and displaces millions from their ancestral lands, while skeptics (or minimalists) do not attribute any cause to physical factors in migration decisions, apart from exacerbating economic, political, or socio-cultural factors. Legal scholars (cf. Burkett, 2011; McAdam, 2012), meanwhile, debate the possibility of integrating 'climate refugees' into existing frameworks such as the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, or the creation of new legal

instruments. If possible, whether the movement is forced or voluntary would then be the most notable factor in determining whether people are refugees, migrants, or displaced persons. The label decides how the migrants are treated, whether they are granted asylum rights, etc. Declaring someone a refugee, for example, is a power tool that regulates the person's mobility in terms of access to welfare or jobs (Black, 2001, p. 58). As Karin Scherschel explains, the category of 'refugee' is "a relational one reflecting the outcome of social negotiations." The Pacific Island states distinctively engage in such negotiations. Some, for example Kiribati, embrace the possibility of a necessitated relocation, yet wish to 'Migrate with Dignity', as their national strategy expresses. Others express to the global society their wish to remain on their islands for as long as possible, while asking for assistance. Little contested, however, is the intimate connection of refugee studies with policy developments. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, is an inter-governmental actor of knowledge production. Originally concerned with war refugees, it is now involved with the 'migration management' of almost every kind of mobility, serving, according to its critics, the interest of developed nations (Geiger & Pécoud, 2012).

### 3. The legacy of climate mobilities in Oceania

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People move. They move for a variety of reasons over short or long distances, for only a while or for good. Sometimes, people have no other option but to move into risky places, or they deem the benefits as higher than the risk involved. In the Pacific, movement for environmental reasons is nothing new. Archaeological research and mythology illustrate how changes in sea level and climatic system have influenced human settlement and society (cf. Nunn 2007 & 2009). Population movement due to anthropogenic environmental damage such as mining and nuclear testing forms arguably the most infamous chapter of Pacific history. What is new is that climate change has the potential to exceed all previous experiences, necessitating new levels of adaptation, maybe even to the point where no physical reference is left. When then does movement change from a culturally accepted, adaptive capacity to involuntary flight? If migration is conceptualized on a continuum between voluntary and involuntary movement, what is the range of adaptation, or rather where on this continuum does migration as success or failure of adaptation lie?

#### **Climate change, adaptation, and human mobility – between necessity, desire, and acceptance**

*"The Micronesian Islands are some of the smallest islands on Earth, many of which barely rise over a few feet above sea level. Some of the islands are so small. They can be crossed within 30 minutes. Our daily lives are continuously affected by our surroundings. With the increase in*

*intensity of tropical storms we have nowhere to run.”* (Mori, President of the Federates States of Micronesia, before the UN Conference on Sustainable Development Rio de Janeiro, 21 June 2012)

Here, Micronesia's president, a Chuuk Islander, alludes to climate change as an unprecedented dynamic in the human-nature relationship of the Pacific Islands. Inter-island clan and kinship networks may offer some initial place to run to, and may alleviate the burden by remittances, yet climate change is also likely to bring people to “social thresholds of adaptation” (Pelling, 2011, p. 165). Once climate mobilities reach beyond national borders, the legal and civil status of the displaced is in question, and they could be pushed into an often precarious existence as a minority. Not only is the political or economic status in danger, but the loss of personal relations and the accustomed socio-cultural context “may leave people bereft of a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose in life” (Oliver-Smith, 2009a, p. 42). Such destruction of the relationality which is a principle of Pacific belonging leads then to what Claudia Card (2003) calls “social death.” This experience is especially traumatic for women as the transmission of land and thus family legacy from mother to daughter is interrupted. With such prospect in sight, many deny the possible necessity to leave, deferring, instead, trust and responsibility to either modern technology (i.e. concrete sea-walls) or God: “He placed them [the islands, R.H.] where they are and he will take care of them” (Chuukese woman, 2011). In the islanders’ relational spatial thinking, physicality is important, too. In reference to his Western Pacific home island in Chuuk State Joakim Peter declares that “[w]e need to belong to places, the physical plots, taro fields, coconut groves, sandy beaches, portions of reefs, fishing corals, and the island in general” (Peter, 2004, p. 261). Yet again, alienation of territory is more than just economic deprivation. Since physical nature also entails a social side, the loss of land also means estrangement from collective and individual identities. Older people especially state that they rather sink with their islands than leave.

Certainly, “[n]o one asked for the opportunity to adapt to climate change – adaptations to a changing climate are in some senses involuntary actions forced upon society, caused by past and present human-induced change” (Adger & Nicholson-Cole, 2011, p. 256). In this line of argument, and if adaptation is seen as the outcome of culturally guided transformative strategies and processes in order to re-establish a sustainable relationship between humans and their environment (cf. Oliver-Smith, 2009a), relocation is indeed the collapse of societal adaptation. The delusion about the number of future climate refugees also reflects the simplistic assumption that migration is a visible result of failed adaptation capability.



And yet, some islanders reacted with indignity to the prospect of having to leave their islands due to environmental deterioration (Chuuk, personal conversations, 2011-12). For thousands of years they have managed to survive. Their adaptational power allowed the dynamic continuation of a cultural self throughout centuries of foreign administration. With the advent of globalized structures, they have transformed the legacy of pre-contact inter-island networks into transnational spaces. And although they have become economically dependent on outside money, they have retained their dignity when it comes to the management of their land. With climate change, migration in an island context has yet again received a new label that brings new attention to an old phenomenon. From an economic point of view, migration and established social, economic, and political networks have long been recognized as an important factor in the resilience of island societies, including climate change (Barnett & Busse, 2001, p. 43). Outmigration can alleviate pressure on local resources while simultaneously furthering an economy of remittances. Thus, to some, migration could be an acceptable strategy, if done the right way. They could take advantage of the expansion of already existing migration schemes, such as New Zealand's Pacific Access Category or Australian labor migration schemes, which bring seasonal laborers or other qualified islanders to the Pacific Rim (cf. Boege, 2011, p. 22; Opeskin & MacDermott, 2010). However, although some have seen these instruments as a tentative climate migration resolution, both nations in question strongly reject the idea of setting a pilot case and neither environmental degradation nor disaster are mentioned in any of the schemes<sup>5</sup>.

Another strategy guides the approximately 3500 people of the Carteret Islands of Bougainville. Because of the irreversible impact of climate change on their atoll, they opt for relocation, but choose to do it their way. Since the mid-1990s, the low-lying islands are severely affected by rising sea levels and have lost nearly half of the land surface. Adaptational measures such as sea-walls and the planting of mangroves were not successful and food security heavily relies on the irregular shipments from Bougainville. As relocation talks of the government were not followed by any action, the Carteret Council of Elders held a series of meetings in 2006 and eventually founded the NGO *Tulele Peisa* as a platform for planning and managing the people's voluntary relocation to Bougainville. The name "sailing in the wind on our own" manifests the goal and motivation of the people – to retain agency in their destiny. Customary farewell and welcome ceremonies, exchange programs and intermarriages are part of the NGO's strategy. It wishes to help the sea-oriented "Carteret people to adapt to a different lifestyle from the coral atolls to mainland Bougainville",

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, environmentally motivated migration has found entry into the electoral programs of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Green Party), the Ökologisch-Demokratische Partei (The Ecological-Democratic Party) and the Piratenpartei (The Pirates, proclaiming a digital revolution) during the German electoral campaign of 2013. Yet, albeit these parties name climate change and environmental disasters as legitimate reasons to migrate, they either do not propose any solution or place the too restrictive existing legislation as the basis.

where gardening, and not fishing, is the major food sector (Tulele Peisa). They have learned their lessons from an earlier Atoll Resettlement Project. In the 1980s, the first families moved to Bougainville as a reaction to environmental stress. Women had the biggest difficulties to adjust. On Sundays they would overcome their fear of the alien tropical forest, venturing out to the beach just to “gaze for hours out to sea towards the atolls” (O'Collins, 1990, p. 259). Removed from the sea and without fishing rights, people relied upon unfamiliar diets. A few years later, the first families returned to their atoll. They were frustrated with the delay in receiving land for cash crops and feared to lose their land rights on the Carterets, rendering them with nothing in the end (Ibid.). Similar issues rule today. In April 2009, the first 100 people moved to Bougainville. However, there was no support, either financial or from the land allocations, for the relocation, let alone a social reception, and by July 2009, three families had returned to the Carterets. As a common theme, conflicting lines run between generations: younger people are more willing to leave their land, while members of the older generations cannot imagine resorting to such drastic measures. Thus, although *Tulele Peisa* stresses their command in the voluntary relocation, most people nevertheless feel forced to take this step (Boege, 2011).

Hence, to position mobility in a dichotomy of winning or losing is problematic at best, especially in cultures where the binary of mobility and place-attachment is part of a distinctive spatial concept. To Adger (2000, p. 355), migration itself is neither sign of resilience nor vulnerability. The type of mobility, however, can serve as an indicator. If people end up in slums or camps, resettlement can hardly be called a success. Yet, if the basic social, political, economic, and cultural integrity is maintained, then it must not be an uprooting experience (Oliver-Smith, personal conversation, 2012). Examples of enforced environment-related mobility can be found widely in the Pacific. The resettlement of atoll populations in the Marshall Islands for nuclear testing is certainly the most dramatic example of the past, whereas the case of Carteret Islanders is an old story that is notably retold. In the end, climate induced relocation does not only have to account for economic sustainability and healthy livelihoods. It also needs to master the transfer of cultural values and social structures.

#### **4. Conclusion**

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Climate change is the movement away from the known past, through an altered present, toward an uncertain future. To see migration as either problem or solution are, in the end, two sides of the same coin of which the only certainty is that people will have to leave their ancestral and accustomed places. Definitions of vulnerability, adaptation, and resilience must therefore be drafted

according to the respective cultural spaces of climate change. If resilience, for example, is defined as the “degree to which at a given point in time a society is adapted to the hazards of its environment” (Oliver-Smith, 2009a, pp. 14, 15), it would adhere to its original meaning in ecology, and movement would be conceptualized as failure. On the other end of the extreme, understanding climate change as purely a social construct denies the physical property of nature and eventually plays down the role of moorings as the constitutive other to movement in Pacific Islanders’ legacy of cultural space. Thus, what will happen if the physical anchor of islanders’ identity dissolves? Will it cause a fissure in Pacific Island culture, or merely, albeit heavily, restructure it?

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# Behind the words – Migration with Dignity in Kiribati

Sara Baptiste-Brown

## Abstract

*The intensifying effects of climate change threaten to displace the population of Kiribati. As a form of response, the Kiribati government has called for Migration With Dignity which currently anchors its activities in action on social, economic, and educational advancement rather than a preemptive response to the challenges of climate change. By attending to Kiribati citizens' perceptions of their own needs, Migration With Dignity is evaluated and additional areas of importance are identified for what could constitute a strategy for dignified preemptive movement in the face of climate change.*

*Keywords: climate change, dignity, Kiribati, migration, movement*

## 1. Introduction

The Pacific atoll nation of Kiribati faces an uncertain future. The environmental effects of climate change<sup>6</sup>, coupled with geographical and social vulnerabilities, could lead to irreparable harm to people, the land, and the country. Kiribati presents a unique case given its atoll geology, extreme environmental vulnerability, Least Developed Country and Small Island Developing State status, and the size and strength of its economy and international political power.

Kiribati and other environmentally vulnerable countries have garnered increasing attention in the media, climate change discussions, and academic research. A prominent strand of discussion on the potential impacts of climate change on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) is the connection between sea level rise and the need to move as a response. Kiribati and other SIDS are seen as being among the first to be confronted with the urgent need for out-migration, this is often labelled 'environmental migration' or 'environmental/ climate change refugees' – current literature and law, however, delegitimize the *climate change refugee* label (Baptiste-Brown, 2012, p. 10; IOM & The Permanent Mission of Greece in Geneva, 2009, p. 43; McAdam, 2010; McAdam, 2011, p. 14; McAdam & Saul, 2010; Renaud et al., 2007, p. 34; Warner et al., 2008, p. 62; Zetter, 2010). Of particular note, McAdam (2010) notes the inflexibility of treaties which prevent application in different contexts, and instead advocates for bilateral and regional agreements. Warner (2011)

<sup>6</sup> A likely temperature increase of more than 1.5 °C and mean sea level rise above the rate of what has already been experienced (IPCC, 2013, pp. 15, 18).

highlights the need for specific language about the management and experience of climate change induced movements.

In the Kiribati context, the central element of Migration with Dignity (MWD) is dignity. In the literature, dignity is explored through a human rights lens (Appleyard, 2001; Kolmannskog, 2009; McAdam & Saul, 2010; The Nansen Initiative, 2013; Warner, 2009; Zetter, 2010). By identifying a gap between legal and normative action, this paper asks whether MWD meets the needs of those most likely to be adversely affected by the effects of climate change. A first step in ensuring appropriateness is to determine whether it corresponds to the needs and conceptions of the people it purports to help. A second concern is whether existing terminology and responses are enough to meet the challenge of climate change induced movement.

The methodology used for this paper is presented in the next section, followed by a background on terminology and the specific case of Kiribati. The underlying principles of dignity and migration, as defined in the context of climate change and environmental issues which inform this research, are explored in the subsequent section. The findings section covers the MWD related responses and the areas of importance to Kiribati people. Finally, the paper closes by reaffirming how a focus on human dignity rather than migration can move the discussion forward on planning for preemptive action in Kiribati.

## **2. Methodology**

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Observational, interview, and secondary data sourcing were conducted from September 2011 to February 2012, examining the social implications of preemptive international climate change displacement in Kiribati. Actors from different professions and vocations (government, non-profit organizations, the Church, the citizenry, funded projects, and the education sector) as well as from different social strata were asked to evaluate how Kiribati is preparing for the future effects of climate change. Baptiste-Brown (2012) presented research on preparatory climate change adaptation activities implemented in Kiribati under MWD and found that conceptions at the international level differed from action on the ground, although positive steps are being taken for citizens. To understand why this dichotomy exists, data collected on i-Kiribati perspectives of whether MWD activities respond to local concerns is presented here.

The analytical structure compares current MWD activities to the principles of dignity and a move away from the heavily overburdened (with cases and connotations) categories of migrant- and

refugee-centric conceptions of mobility. A dominant objective of MWD is avoiding being a burden on host societies through employability. The principles of dignity extracted from the literature are free will, cultural rights, social acceptance, livelihood, and nature. Together, these categories form the basis used to evaluate responses from i-Kiribati on what MWD means to them.

### 3. Background

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Many attempts at crafting a definition for climate change induced movement are limited by their reactive nature. The use of the present and past tenses require that affected parties already be experiencing hardship — e.g. “facing or experiencing climate displacement” (Displacement Solutions 2013, Principle 2), “are displaced [...] or who feel obliged to leave” (Gorlick, 2007, as cited in Zetter, 2010, p. 388), “lives, livelihoods and welfare have been placed at serious risk” (ibid.), “persons who had been displaced” (Martin, 2010, p. 376). Another important consideration is the difference between forced and “motivated” environmental migration decisions, as for example clarified by Renaud, Bogardi, Dun, and Warner (2007, pp. 11-12, original emphasis) who distinguish between

*“[...] forced environmental migrant who **has** to leave his/her place of normal residence because of an environmental stressor as opposed to an environmentally motivated migrant who is a person who **may** decide to move because of an environmental stressor”.*

Renaud et al.’s separation of forced and “motivated” environmental migration highlights a similar distinction as the reactive-preemptive divide. If one is forced to leave, they can be seen as reacting to such extreme external stimuli that there is little choice in the matter. Whereas if one begins to see effects of external stimuli that are likely to get worse and to require their departure, then one might be *motivated* to move before the situation becomes intractable.

A definition crafted in Baptiste-Brown (2012, p. 11, emphasis added) from the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) 94th Session, Discussion note: Migration and the Environment* addresses some of these issues by framing the subjects of this paper as:

*“[...] persons **forced or obliged** to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, as a result of **or in order to avoid** the effects of natural or human-made disasters or slow-onset catastrophes, and who move either within their country or abroad”.*

This definition encompasses the elements of force versus motivation, preemption, the nature, speed, and duration of the impetus, and geographical scope of movement.



## Kiribati on the front line

South Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati and home to half of the country's population of approximately 103,000, has an average width of 450 meters, maximum height above mean sea level of 3.5 meters, and a high tide regularly reaching 2.8 meters (Bureau of Meteorology, 2011; MELAD, 2007, p. 4; National Statistics Office, 2012; World Bank, 2004, p. 19). An important example of the effects of climate change, identified by the government's *Ministry of Environment, Land and Agriculture Development* is water availability (MELAD, 2007, p. 27, 40). Gradual increases in sea level, melting glaciers, and thermal expansion are contributors to higher tides and an increase in frequency of storms (Aung et al., 2009, p. 1172; Locke, 2009, p. 175; MELAD, 2009, p. 12; UNFCCC, 2004, p. 10). This, in turn, increases the frequency of flooding events and increases salinity in the groundwater lenses because of salt water intrusion (Kelman & West, 2009, p. 4; MELAD, 2009, pp. 2, 16; UNFCCC, 2004, p. 5; World Bank, 2009, pp. 9-10).

In addition to the physical environmental effects of climate change, Kiribati faces critical factors in resilience for the country and its people and has been classified as "extremely vulnerable", particularly relating to the incidence of wet periods, country dispersion, isolation, lowlands, waste treatment, sanitation, and population growth (SOPAC, 2005). Geographically (physical and human pressures as well as temporal and spatial risks and hazards), Kiribati was ranked as the second most environmentally vulnerable country and one of only three countries also recognized as a SIDS and a Least Developing Country (Turvey, 2007, pp. 248, 258).

Anecdotal data reveals that return and cyclical migration are common given strong cultural and livelihood ties to the land (Baptiste-Brown 2012, pp. 21-22). A common Kiribati saying is: "Nna kana tanon abau" ("I want to come back and eat the soil of my land"), illustrating the strong personal and cultural value that i-Kiribati place on land as home and final resting place (Ibid.). These important aspects of migration as it is currently employed are likely to cease to exist if the severity of the effects of climate change requires the exodus of i-Kiribati (Firth, 2006, p. 95, as cited in Baptiste-Brown, 2012, p. 21). This sentiment was expressed by Tessie Eria Lambourne, Kiribati's Foreign Affairs Secretary:

*"What we know now is that when our people travel or migrate abroad, they always know there will be Kiribati to go back to. But in the face of this climate threat, our people can't really accept the fact that maybe one day in the future, we may not have a Kiribati to return to. This is the emotional challenge for our people."* (MacLellan, 2011).

## 4. Underlying Principles

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### Defining Dignity

Kolmannskog (2009, p. 3) recalls that “most western traditions [...] have historically based human dignity in R/reason and F/free W/will and emphasized a link to Nature and/or the Divine”. From a human rights perspective, people ought to have “the right not to suffer from [and] to avoid dangerous climate change” (Adger, 2004 & Caney, 2008, as cited in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2012, p. 401). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948, Articles 22 & 25) alludes to “economic, social and cultural rights [as] indispensable for [...] dignity” and “the right to a standard of living adequate for [...] health and well-being [...] in the event of [...] lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [one’s] control”. The Stockholm Declaration (UNEP, 1972, Principle 1) invokes the quality of the environment as an important aspect for dignity and well-being.

### More Than Migration

In academic, developmental, and political discourse on ‘ex situ’ adaptation to the effects of climate change, affected persons are usually categorized as internally displaced, refugees, or migrants. This section briefly seeks to highlight the need for more than these categories. First, increasing population density from population growth and in-migration from other islands to South Tarawa makes continued internal displacement improbable (McAdam, 2011, p. 9). Second, the use of ‘refugee’ in this context has been widely and convincingly refuted as not indicated. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that refugees are persons escaping persecution and who have been abandoned by the safety mechanisms in their home country (UNHCR, 1951, p. 16). The environment has not been recognized as a persecuting agent and, moreover, Kiribati is among the most consistent in its call for solutions rather than shirking its responsibilities. Most important is the outright rejection of the suggestion of refugee status by many Pacific SIDS inhabitants (McAdam, 2013). Third, the connotations overshadowing ‘migration’ has entrenched it in the realm of choice (UNHCR, 2013). This paper’s target are those for whom the choice of migration is not an option in the face of the increasing effects of climate change that could render their home uninhabitable.

Skilled migration is the primary means of preparatory action related to mobility in Kiribati (Baptiste-Brown, 2012). President Anote Tong expresses the need for a “long-term merit-based relocation strategy” involving “the upskilling [sic] of [the Kiribati] people to make them competitive and

marketable at [sic] international labour markets” (UN News Centre, 2008). This is commonly expressed within the population as a desire to avoid being a burden in host countries (Baptiste-Brown, 2012; Davison, 2013; Lagan, 2013; Uan, 2013). With just under 30% of the active population in paid employment, many people lack the capacities to compete on an equal footing outside of the country (Baptiste-Brown, 2012, p. 15; McAdam, 2010, p. 7; National Statistics Office, 2012).

MWD in Kiribati can be seen as a first step in mobilizing in the face of climate change, or as a second step if one considers the in-migration to South Tarawa. This paper argues that there needs to be a third step in the form of a preemptive response to climate change related movement that focuses on the needs, desires, and understanding of the public to ensure public participation in decision-making.

## 5. Findings

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Respondents revealed a need for awareness and understanding about climate change issues. MWD remains a government-level discussion, while at the community and household levels, especially outside South Tarawa, MWD and its reasons are largely not known or understood. A singularly pithy opinion on how the international message of MWD balances with government action at home for those most in need of recourses was expressed as “We need action, not actors” (Respondent 2).

Respondents went beyond issues of employability and education, detailing concerns about status and self-actualization, which affect dignity. One respondent exposed a double-edged reality by referring to his own self-imposed demotion by leaving a high ranking position in Kiribati for a relatively socially and financially lower position in a developed country (Respondent 4). While education was understood to be important, financial security can be a deciding factor in emigration decisions. Examples were given of uneducated manual labourers saving money to migrate and conversely of educated people not being able to afford the cost of international travel (Respondent 4). The importance of self-determination was highlighted through the view that it is oxymoronic to have permanent displacement “with dignity”, given the belief that once an i-Kiribati leaves their home indefinitely they are no longer a “real” i-Kiribati (Respondent 7). This corresponds to the expressed need for a place that can be called Kiribati and where they can remain i-Kiribati, maintaining their community and culture (Respondent 6).

Culture community mores like celebrations, costumes, customs, dancing, family connections, language, and music, cannot and should not be broken into smaller pieces (Respondent 3). As an indispensable feature, natural resources surfaced as a grave concern; because inputs for traditional food, garments, or physical structures may not be available in locations far from the equator

(Respondent 5). More than just as components, the physical land and ocean and their associated rights were highlighted as issues (Respondent 7).

Acknowledgement that the majority of the population will require assistance, if not inducement, brought to the fore island-by-island or even total migration as a means of maintaining social cohesion (Respondent 8). A sensitivity to being on the land of “others” – amplified when involving homogeneous Pacific nations – stemming from Kiribati’s history of migration, saw a need to guard against prejudice, second-class citizenry, and related societal problems (Respondent 1).

## **6. Discussion**

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This research found that a more inclusive preemptive and dignified response to the exacerbating effects of climate change might include notions of free will, cultural rights, social acceptance, livelihood management, and nature. In the event of mass displacement, there may be i-Kiribati who decide to stay and die where they were born, which is an important aspect of culture and should be respected. Cultural integrity however does not preclude Kiribati culture from shifting with circumstances. In some ways a larger shift by moving to a multicultural country may prove more manageable from a cultural standpoint than to another Pacific Island Country, as often proposed. Island scale movement might be considered if the wishes for cultural continuity are to be heeded. This paper also finds that even in its stated goal of merit-based migration with dignity, MWD does not go far enough in recognizing the desire of i-Kiribati to reach outside themselves and their tight-knit communities to become contributing members of their host country. Nature — as home, provider, as well as offending agent — evokes a duality of responses, from its unique features difficult to replicate elsewhere to its ability to potentially destroy life as its currently experienced.

## **7. Conclusion**

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To answer the overarching question of this paper, focusing on ‘migration’ in the Migration With Dignity strategy hampers action on preemptive planning for the most vulnerable proportion of the Kiribati population. Many questions remain as to how Kiribati and its people will overcome the challenges of climate change, but dignity should never be compromised in a search for solutions.

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## Comment

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The Pacific islands have a status as a symbol of the global future under conditions of climate change. They are seen as the canaries in the coalmine, places where we can watch the future cultural and social effects of climate change. But the Pacific could also be the pioneer of innovative and maybe more emancipatory adaptation concepts and practices.

Both papers help us understand more about ideas and practices of space in the Pacific region that are obviously quite different from Western concepts of space and home. Rebecca Hofmann and Sara Baptiste Brown observe how important the social meaning of land is to Pacific islanders, and the extent to which the concept of migration is connected to cyclical and return migration. It becomes clear that these concepts of land and belonging are much closer to ideas of an entangled 'social nature' than to concepts that 'naturalize' man-made spaces, such as national borders. We can learn from Pacific concepts of land to think about space in a more constructivist *and* material way in the same time. We must always remember that the meanings of space change in accordance with their social and cultural function and their significance in a range of contexts, such as gender, hierarchy and belonging.

The leader of postcolonial thought in the Pacific, Epeli Hau'ofa has conceptualized pre-colonial Oceania as a meeting space for Pacific Islanders, as a "sea of islands" (Hau'ofa 1993), where the islanders' freedom of movement was not hindered by national borders. Historically, the Pacific was an open-access region used by its inhabitants for social and economic benefit. General restrictions on travel and resettlement were first introduced by the colonial powers. Today colonial images of Oceania live on as a region composed of isolated, vulnerable and distant island states: "islands in a far sea". Such images are often prominent in discourses of climate change effects in the region.

Increasingly, voices in the Pacific are drawing connections between pre-colonial and present-day supranational migration and settlement movements. In order to alleviate the effects of climate change, they campaign for a new, transnational solidarity and unity for the Pacific. One example of a new movement that argues along these lines is *Pacific Voyaging*. By conforming large groups of sailors from throughout the region that visit different islands and perform traditional rituals and festivities, the intention is to highlight the traditional practice of cross-border sea travel in the Pacific,



and draw attention to the consequences of climate change and other environmental problems (Farbotko 2012).

I am sure we can learn from these emancipatory concepts of space that are not based on the nation state but consider the Pacific region as a “sea of islands” (Hau’ofa 1993). They highlight the historical nature of spatial models and bring the legacy of the colonial period and debates on global justice into the discussion of climate change adaptation.

Regarding the Kiribati government’s Migrate with dignity strategy, we learned from Sara that she questions its emancipatory potential and sees various problematic aspects. It seems perfectly compatible with the neoliberal management approach to migration that we heard about several times during the workshop. If environmental migrants become entrepreneurs, the economic benefits for the receiving countries are obvious. But the right to migrate is not part of this strategy. The far-reaching-side effects of these migration programs can already be seen in Kiribati. As Sara observed, while the more educated young people are already leaving Kiribati, the weak are left behind. A severe brain drain is the consequence.

So both papers teach us that we need new concepts of citizenship and solidarity that can be inspired by transnational, fluid Pacific ways of thinking about space and home. As scholars, we are challenged to adopt an innovative approach towards environmental change and migration, and question assumptions about the nation state system that frame the discussion.

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## **“Denaturalizing Adaptation, Resocializing the Climate”: Theoretical and methodological reflections on how to follow a travelling idea of climate change<sup>7</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores an alternative ontology of the Adaptation to Climate Change (ACC) Paradigm and mobility nexus. It proposes an analytic shift from focusing on the mobility of people to the mobility of the ACC idea itself. Since the institutional recognition of adaptation as a fundamental principle of international climate policy at the UNFCCC in 2001, as one of the essential pillars for intervention in the Global South in the fight against climate change, the idea has mobilized an array of (inter)national and local actors, funds, institutional reforms that it can by now rightfully be considered a new development paradigm. The securitization of the adaptation discourse, with particular alarmism for sub-Saharan Africa and the small island developing states, is currently ‘travelling’ to the Global South with pronounced force. This inevitably reconfigures North-South relations and leads to new socio-political challenges at the ‘local’ level. The following account is based on fourteen months of a ‘nodal’ ethnography, combined with a detailed ethnographic account of ‘adaptation horizons’ from a village in Maasailand, Northern Tanzania. This paper will demonstrate how the idea of adaptation to climate change travels from the ‘global’ to the ‘local’, and how it mobilizes varying actors and policy prescriptions. It will be demonstrated how it finally brings longstanding tensions to the fore that exist between the government of Tanzania and the Maasai pastoralists. By shining light on these dynamics this paper aims to ‘denaturalize’ the adaptation paradigm, and to focus on which socio-political challenges are enticed when the idea gets translated across a distance. As such, this paper wishes to contribute to theoretical and methodological approaches that understand climate change as a mobilizing idea, which reveals the (often) incompatible ontologies and political interests between what is drafted globally and experienced locally.*

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## 1. Introduction

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The Adaptation to Climate Change (ACC) discourse has a long history in the UN process. It took almost two decades before adaptation became officially acknowledged as a major pillar within the UNFCCC policy (Schipper 2009, p. 369), and gained political momentum in 2001. Currently, ACC is being conveyed as the *new prophecy* for the Global South, with particular urge for small island states and sub-Saharan Africa. While initially the focus of the international climate policies was on mitigation – or on how to control the source of the problem by reducing greenhouse gas emissions – it is now argued that climate change is already happening on the ground. Hence, planned adaptation for the Global South in general and Africa in particular is considered to be the only viable option for survival. Sub-Saharan Africa is regarded as the most vulnerable region without sufficient capacities to adapt to a changing climate, because of widespread poverty, and a lack of financial resources, (appropriate) knowledge, and technologies. Moreover, since it contributed least to the problem yet facing the worst consequences, it is argued that from an historical and ethical point of view, Africa should be assisted by the developed nations in adaptation (cf. Adger, 2001; Paavola & Adger, 2002). It has been argued that we can speak of an adaptation *imperative*, reminding us of James Ferguson’s “anti-politics machine” of development (cf. Wisner et al., 2012), as it assumes that people are marginalized and vulnerable to climate change and that poverty forms an inherent part of their livelihoods. In other words, a tendency within the current adaptation research agenda can be observed that removes the global political economy and general socio-political conditions from the discussion, making the ACC-paradigm travel under a seemingly neutral guise. In the following I therefore argue that there is a need to denaturalize adaptation and ‘bring back the political’ into the analysis (Swyngedouw, 2010; Weisser et al., 2014; Eguavoen et al., 2013; De Wit, 2011).

A second tendency in both the adaptation literature and in international policy making is that adaptation to climate change is predominantly understood as a technical solution in reaction to changing bio-physical conditions, for which a toolbox of best practices is needed. These *climate deterministic* ‘cookie-cutter’ solutions are by and large underpinned by the conceptual separation of Nature and Culture. This distinction has generally been pointed out by historians as the hallmark of Western Enlightenment (Hulme, 2011; Rudiak-Gould, 2013). In the following analysis it will be argued that this separation largely overlooks the symbolic, socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions of the climate and the weather that deserve as much attention as the biophysical processes, since these two are ultimately inseparable (Orlove & Strauss, 2003, p. 6). As vividly expressed in the words of one of my informants: “Perhaps the rains have changed, but we have changed too. We used to follow the

clouds, nowadays we are settled”<sup>8</sup>. In other words, for the Maasai in Terrat the climate and the weather are not perceived to be something external to them, but are rather part and parcel of an integral weave of the world that binds society together. Against this brief theoretical background, this paper wishes to both ‘denaturalize adaptation’ and ‘resocialize’ the climate. It will do so by following the travelling idea from international platforms to a local village in Tanzania – along its mobilizing journey – and show how it possibly enables us to reveal the political entanglements, and ontological confusions that are enticed across different scales.

## 2. A ‘nodal’-ethnography

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Mediated along a complex chain of global and local connectivity by varying actors, the climate change discourse is constantly being modified, translated, storied, transformed and enacted. Inspired by Marcus’ proposed idea to “follow the thing, the people, the metaphor” (Marcus, 1995), I traced this discursive journey from different international negotiation platforms to a local village. I have been trying to shed light on how the ACC paradigm is mediated by systems of power; but also how it is translated and given meaning to by different people in different localities. Central questions that I try to answer are: how do different truth regimes fuse in their encounter? Who can benefit from these emerging discourses and who cannot? In order to grasp the travelling of the ACC paradigm from international negotiation platforms to the village level in Northern Tanzania, a so-called ‘nodal’ ethnography (Hodgson, 2011) has been carried out. More concretely, I followed mobile ‘epistemic communities’ to negotiation sites and sensitization meetings where adaptation discourses are given further impetus into policy documents. The ethnographic merits of focusing on these meetings and sites where the idea gets translated and mediated lies in the ability to open up the ‘black box’ of these socio-spatial practices that are often left out of the analytic gaze of researchers. While it is during these encounters where friction occurs, opposing views, different knowledge and meaning systems are played out and incompatible interests are compromised before they gain hegemonic momentum and travel further to live life anew. Put differently, it gives us insight into who has the power to translate the epistemics of climate change, whose interests are downplayed and what are the conditions under which the idea travels and is embraced as an acceptable truth claim, or not.

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<sup>8</sup> What this pastoralist is referring to is the fact that the Maasai communities were forced to settle since the 1960s. Prior to this forced settlement the pastoralists used to have a nomadic lifestyle, and ‘following the clouds’ thus guided their relationship to the environment and the climate. It is therefore difficult to dislocate (alleged) changing patterns of rains from a changed livelihood.

### 3. Some contours of Tanzania's 'translation regime'

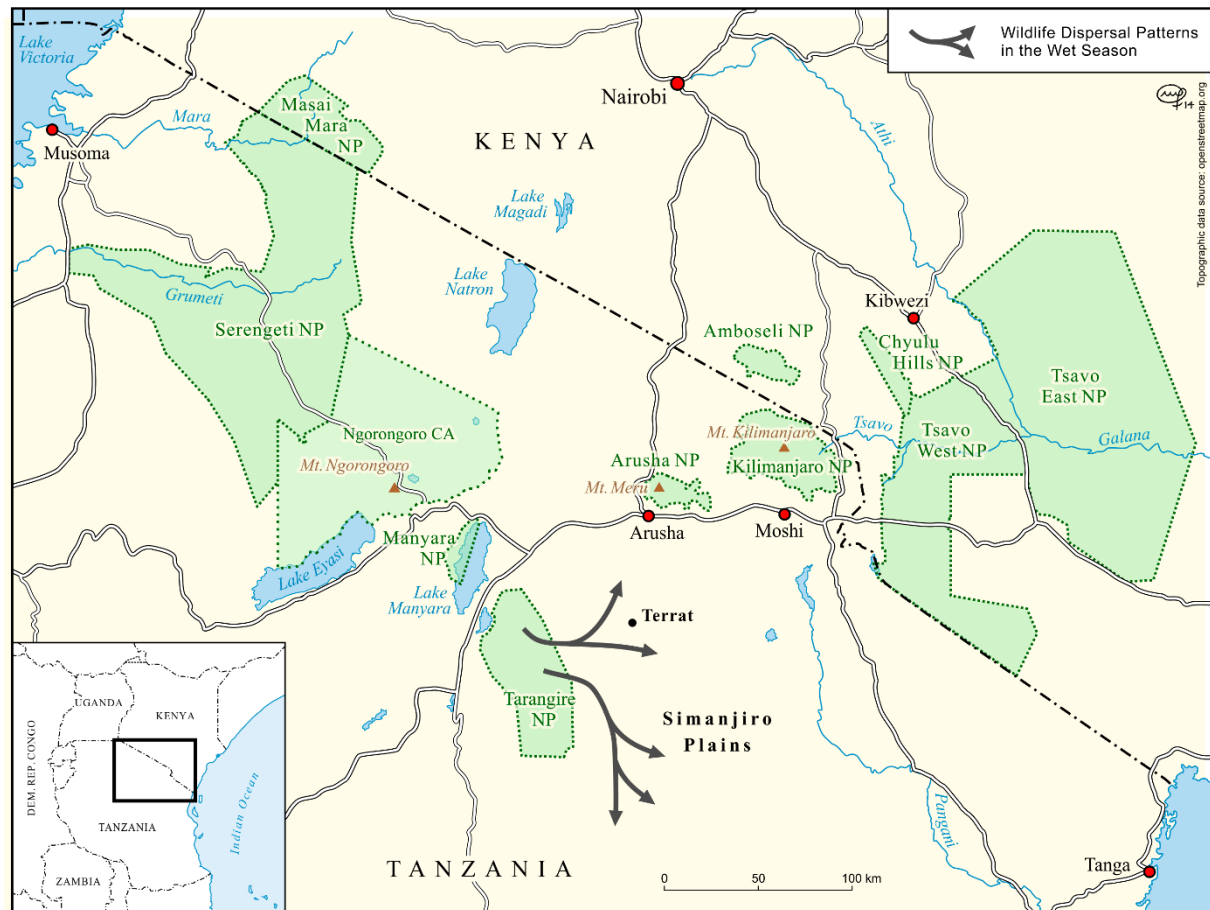
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In what follows I will briefly contextualize the 'translation regime' through which the ACC paradigm travels in Tanzania, with a particular focus on matters related to the Maasai (agro)pastoralists. The rural village called Terrat, where I carried out the largest part of my research, lies in the Simanjiro plains in Northern Tanzania (see figure below)<sup>9</sup>. This larger region that is internationally renowned for its 'natural wonders' and scenic beauty like the Serengeti plains and the Ngorongoro crater forms part of a longstanding institutional legacy of conservation and the creation of national parks. This environment has a particular history of being subjected to globally constructed ideas of what nature is, and how humans can "fit" (or: rather *not* fit) nature in order to conserve the world's remaining pristine places and wildlife. This idea of *fortress conservation* (Brockington, 2002) principally entails the eviction of people from areas where they have been dwelling for decades. As we can see below, Terrat underwent a similar fate. The village is bordering Tarangire National Park, which used to be part of the herders' grazing area before it became a national park in 1970. While the pastoralists are not permitted to enter, and their cattle thus is not allowed to graze inside the national park, vice versa the wildlife disperses into the wider area during the rainy season – leaving little grasses for the herds of the Maasai.

The gazettelement of Tarangire as a national park remains a painful memory for people who were evicted (Igoe & Brockington, 1999, as cited in Sachedina, 2008, p. 110). For the Maasai of Simanjiro the area that is now Tarangire was central to their system of transhumance pastoralism, since the most important and reliable dry-season water point in the entire ecosystem – the Tarangire river – is located inside the park. Moreover, it contains a number of seasonal water resources. Local herders have claimed that the national park has disrupted their traditional herding systems, and played an important role in the decline of Simanjiro's pastoral economy (Igoe, 2002, pp. 80-82). It comes therefore as no surprise that herders complain about the increasing lack of water and green pastures for their cattle.

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<sup>9</sup> Source: Jim Igoe, 2002, p. 82.



**Figure 1: Wildlife Dispersal Patterns in the Wet Season from Tarangire to the Simanjiro Plain, Cartography: Monika Feinen, University of Cologne**

How does this relate to (the idea of) adaptation to climate change? If we apply a political ecology lens – that traces the genealogy of environmental narratives – it becomes clear that the vulnerability and marginalization of the Maasai pastoralists cannot be reduced to changes in the climate, as is currently persistently argued by the Tanzanian government. Instead, their vulnerability should rather be understood in light of broader socio-political struggles that the Maasai are facing. For example, during the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) that was held in Arusha in 2012, Tanzania’s president Jakaya Kikwete held a speech in which he emphatically expressed his concern for the Maasai families, “who became suddenly poor” in 2009, when a severe drought hit several regions in Tanzania. It was the same year in which a longstanding land conflict in Loliondo Division surfaced after the president had decided to evict thousands of Maasai from their ancestral lands. Allegations of human rights abuses followed and economic losses to the communities like burnt houses, death of livestock and property loss were reported<sup>10</sup>. The argument that was used by the government to legitimize the violent evictions was that the pastoralists’ lifestyle is destructive for the environment, and that this unique ecosystem should be used for conservation purposes. The

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed overview of the conflict: [http://letstalklandtanzania.com/s/download/case\\_studies/Loliondo%20FEMACT%20Eviction%20Fact%20Finding%20Report.pdf](http://letstalklandtanzania.com/s/download/case_studies/Loliondo%20FEMACT%20Eviction%20Fact%20Finding%20Report.pdf)

land was allocated to private investor OBC from the United Arab Emirates. After building his own airstrip – Dubai’s Brigadier (the owner of OBC) was ready to hunt for wildlife. In this highly politicized context, the 2009 drought (in the name of climate change) ‘came in handy’ as the ultimate scapegoat to explain the pastoralists’ fate in light of a global phenomenon, concealing the local effects of the national neoliberal ideology.

#### 4. Adaptation to what?

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In this final section I aim to flesh out why adaptation possibly means different things to different people. In the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) that was drafted for the UNFCCC by the government of Tanzania in 2007 (and all other Least Developing Countries)<sup>11</sup>, a few remarkable suggestions stand out regarding the pastoralist mode of living that deserve a brief historical contextualization. During several of the public meetings that I attended, representatives of the Tanzanian government expressed their opinion about the fact that the Maasai are destroyers of the environment, that their herds are too large and that they live a backwards life that is in need of serious change through education. These misconceptions already date back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was assumed that pastoral people had an “irrational” attachment to their livestock, and that the livestock numbers were maximized regardless of the carrying capacity of the rangelands (Herskovits, 1926). This scientific paradigm had a wide influence on development policies, which entailed that any move towards sustainability was livestock *reduction* (McCabe, 2003, p. 101). Also Hardin’s article on “The Tragedy of the Commons” was grounded in the assumption that traditional pastoral systems were fundamentally non-sustainable (Hardin, 1968). This similarly continued to shape rangeland development policies that advocated for the reduction in livestock, and moreover, for the privatization of rangeland resources (McCabe, 2003). If we now take a closer look at the NAPA, the parallels of the adaptation proposals with these former misconceptions are striking<sup>12</sup>. It is stated that “the existing number of cattle in Tanzania has already surpassed the normal carrying capacity” (p. 7). Among the adaptation strategies in the livestock sector the following reactive adaptation measures are proposed: (1) the change of land use patterns, (2) education of farmers and livestock keepers, (3) sustainable range management, (4) control the movement of livestock, and (5)

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<sup>11</sup> The NAPAs provide a process for LDCs to identify priority activities that respond to their urgent and immediate needs to adapt to climate change: [https://unfccc.int/national\\_reports/napa/items/2719.php](https://unfccc.int/national_reports/napa/items/2719.php)

<sup>12</sup> It is worth to mention that currently a widely accepted view among ecologists states that arid rangelands like the Simanjiro plains are ‘nonequilibrium ecosystems’, meaning that precipitation patterns are highly variable and droughts frequent. Furthermore, this entails that external factors – e.g. variability in the precipitation pattern, not herbivore numbers – exert a strong influence on the structure and condition of the rangelands (McCabe, 2003, p. 102). A pronounced climate variability is thus something inherent to the ecosystem rather than a novel dynamic. For another comprehensive study that counters the abovementioned ‘non-sustainability’ paradigm see: Homewood and Rodgers (1991).

advocate zero grazing (table 6, p. 22)<sup>13</sup>. Whereas the government of Tanzania views a controlled mobility of livestock as the best adaptation strategy, in the view of Maasai pastoralists this is the *antithesis* of adaptation. Moreover, while the government portrays the Maasai as both victims and perpetrators of a changing climate, the Maasai and NGOs representing them rather see themselves as *masters* of adaptation. Put in the words of an NGO worker:

*We are used to adaptation since we can remember. Movement is our way of life, we have always followed the clouds. (...) You cannot just say that we should practice agriculture in the drylands, because drylands do not support agriculture. What the government does not understand is that pastoralism is a livelihood system. They say that we need education, but I think it is them who need to be educated.*

As also became clear from the numerous accounts from the Maasai herders of Terrat, the weather and the climate cannot be detached from themselves, their way of life, and what they believe in. There is a strong moral bond between the weather and society. If they had suffered from a bad year without rainfall, they explained that something must be wrong in the moral conduct of the community that needs to be rectified by showing good behavior. The climate serves as a mirror between God and His people, a way to mediate morality and communicate both gratification as well as discontent. Rain is received as a blessing and drought as its cursing counterpart. It is not for nothing that the word *Engai* in the Maa language concurrently means God, rain and the sky. I believe therefore, that it is through these dimensions that adaptation to climate change should (at least partly) be understood.

## 5. Concluding remarks

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In this paper I have tried to show how climate change adaptation as a *travelling idea* allows us to see which actors and things are mobilized in the broader context of a neo-liberal political landscape in Tanzania. It reveals how the ACC paradigm is naturalized by the Tanzanian government in order to obfuscate, among other things, large scale land acquisitions by foreign investors that continue to take place, which make the Maasai vulnerable players in a complicated story. Moreover, the travelling ACC paradigm brings old tensions to the fore that already existed between the Maasai pastoralists and the government. It entices age old misconceptions of the pastoralists alleged irrational relationship with their environment; and is seized by the government as another attempt to restrict the Maasai in their mobility patterns and size of their herds. In turn, a counter-discourse that emerges among NGOs and Maasai representatives holds that the pastoralists are masters of

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<sup>13</sup> The attempt to relocate pastoralists and 'promote' agriculture and the sedentary life style, date back to the days of British colonial rule (Hodgson, 2011).



adaptation rather than victims of a changing climate. Against this background I argue that more critical scrutiny is needed of adaptation as a travelling and mobilizing idea. Moreover, a better understanding is needed of translation regimes through which these competing knowledge claims travel that enable us to denaturalize the ACC paradigm. Finally, in order to understand what adaptation means at the local level the climate needs to be *resocialized*. A more holistic approach to climate change adaptation that departs from techno-fix solutions is key to do justice to the intricacies of adaptation practices and horizons that differ from place to place.

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## Comment

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In her paper, Sara de Wit convincingly conceptualizes climate change as a travelling idea that mobilizes “varying actors and policy prescriptions” and ultimately leads to socio-political challenges as it gets translated across different scales. Drawing on ethnographic field work in Northern Tanzania, she criticizes what she regards as a naturalization of the adaptation paradigm and pleads instead for a resocialization of climate conditions by foregrounding their symbolic and social dimensions. Since I very much appreciate the paper’s overall approach, I would like to focus in my comment on more specific questions: (1) *What makes an ethnography ‘nodal’ – and is there a ‘non-nodal’ ethnography?* Sara says relatively little on what she methodologically did in the field and how she came to terms with the (postcolonial) power relations involved in her own ethnography. (2) *Is it appropriate to call the official account of the Massai’s way of life a ‘misconception’?* I agree that the Tanzanian Government’s opinion on pastoralism is based on a specific conception – one which is clearly rooted in traditional ideas, as Sara points out –, but to call it a mis-conception implies to tacitly claim some sort of objectivity for one’s own account. (3) *Would it be possible to think of climate change without scale?* Like much of the climate change discourse, the paper’s spatial imaginary is organized around the concept of scale. Taking into account the recent critiques of scalar ontologies, I think it would make perfect sense to analyze how the different scales – from the local to the global – are produced and reproduced in the writings on climate change.

# Beyond isolated Atlantises in an infinite ocean: Replacing the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific

*Emilie Chevalier*

## 1. Introduction

The Pacific islands are made up of twenty-two countries and territories. Approximately 10 million inhabitants live in about 300 islands (Nansen Initiative, 2013, p. 4). In the last decade, the region has emerged among the media, international institutions and civil society as one of climate change's icons and hotspots. The United Nations Environment Program declared in 2005 that the inhabitants of Lataw (Tegua island, Torres archipelago, northern Vanuatu) were the 'World's first climate change refugees' when the village was moved inland.

In this context, the prevailing iconography and vocabulary associated with the climate change and migration nexus (CCMN) regarding the South Pacific seems to be dominated by the figure of the small island in a geographical sense and of the small island developing state in a political sense. This single-unit based imagery seems to tie islanders with the notions of isolation and powerlessness in a continued process of othering. Carol Farbotko pointed out that such representations could be viewed as "the legacy of the island laboratory" and "[...] enable the exercise and justification of cosmopolitan activism towards climate change that speaks in part through space" (Farbotko, 2010, p. 1).

Building on Farbotko's argument on the politicization of island space, this paper will attempt to show the necessity of varying our perspectives on the nature and scale of island space to understand the dynamics and meanings of the CCMN in the Pacific. One way to do so can be to consider the CCMN as a paradigm embedded in the dynamics of territorial networks. Territorial networks can be defined as multi-scalar systems of customary informal or institutionalized interactions between places, with these systems being experienced, identified and appropriated by social groups as well as embedded in power relations. The interest of this concept is threefold. It can allow researchers to pay a greater attention to the scalar, multi-local and relational dynamics of the CCMN. Secondly, discourses on climate change and migration reveal and may influence the political and social dynamics producing the continuities and discontinuities that structure territorial networks in the South Pacific. Finally,

studying the CCMN in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific allows an analysis of hierarchies and inequalities between actors and places.

First, I will focus on the need and opportunity to look at island spaces from a relational perspective through the concept of territorial networks. Then I will try to show how it can be applied to the climate change and migration nexus in the South Pacific.

## **2. Shifting our eyes away from the isolated island: Seeing the South Pacific in terms of territorial networks**

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### **Singularization and isolation of Pacific island space in climate change and migration narratives**

Carol Farbotko has shown in several articles how low-lying islands are used to materialize the science of climate change (Ibid.). Her discourse analysis of the of climate change and population displacement narratives about Tuvalu in the Sydney Morning Herald showed the Australian newspaper is an example of how island space and identities are constructed by 'the West' within the framework of sea-level rise (Farbotko, 2005, p. 1). The following examples will demonstrate how her analysis can be applied to a multitude of discourses ranging across various types of actors.

(1) The sea-level rise/small islands pairing was highly publicised in the fall of 2013 in relation to the 'Ioane Teitiota' case. This i-Kiribati citizen submitted a plea to New Zealand's High Court to grant the family asylum based on the negative repercussions that climate change impacts would have on their well-being, were they to go back to Kiribati. The court denied them refugee status on the basis that this situation did not qualify under the Geneva Convention. The case received worldwide coverage. Through a Google News research on the topic on October 24th<sup>14</sup>, I found 20 articles illustrated by a picture. The illustrations fell into three categories according to the images and the accompanying comments: 6 pictures featured men and/ or buildings in Kiribati in, under the water and/or building a sea wall, 11 pictures featured islets, atolls or parts of either one without obvious presence of men and 3 featured images of daily life in Kiribati, a political banner and a polar bear on a tiny iceberg. While the decisive part of the case lies in the interpretation of an international convention by a judge in New Zealand, the pictures are focusing mainly on the island of origin, and more specifically on single atolls or islets, and low-lying shores.

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<sup>14</sup> With the following settings: (1) keywords: 'Ioane Teitiota' (2) 'All results', 'In the past month', 'Sorted by date', and 'Hide duplicates' provided 21 results. The operation was repeated several times and obtained the same proportions, with only one picture featuring a balance of justice. These results are to be read carefully. The search should be carried over a longer period and on various computers and search engines. They can however be considered an indication of the types of images chosen to illustrate this case.

(2) Beyond the media sphere, international organisations have also focused on the case of small and low-lying island states. For instance, in 2012, François Crépeau, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, prepared a report for the UN General Assembly which includes a “Thematic section: climate change and migration”. In section C “Question of definition: what is climate-change-induced migration?” and two sub-sections dedicated to the identification of “vulnerable people” and “vulnerable places”, low-lying island states are repeatedly identified as “more exposed to environmental migration” (Crépeau, 2012, pp. 8-9). The report also stresses that vulnerability in Oceania is reinforced by the fact that most small island States are developing countries “[...] facing multiple stresses [...]” (Ibid., p. 9).

In “Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the evidence”, the International Organisation for Migration (IMO) expressed similar views regarding the need for some Pacific islanders to resort to international migration due to the insular context:

*[T]he Pacific small island developing States represent a particular case where ‘statelessness’ could be an issue. Longer distance international migration requires financial resources and social networks which facilitate such a move. [...] While international migration remains out of reach for many of the most vulnerable to environmental stresses and shocks, the residents of some small island states are also limited in terms of their ability to undertake internal migration [...] Similar concerns have been expressed for the populations of some Pacific small island developing States, such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu, in the context of raised sea-levels and increased storm surge intensity due to climate change [...].* (Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009, p. 23)

In these examples, South Pacific islands are mostly represented as singularised units, both from a physical perspective (the island) or a political one (the island-state). They are marked by the lexical and visual fields of spatial, social and economic discontinuity created by the ocean, and they seem to lack both the spatial capital and resources to overcome these features. Carol Farbotko mobilises “the litany of smallness” (Farbotko, 2010, p. 1) from Epeli Hau’ofa’s 1993 essay “Rediscovering Oceania: Our sea of islands” to develop a postcolonial critique of the notion of the climate change refugee. Both authors’ central argument is that continuing relations of dependence are vehicled and maintained through these representations of the smallness and isolation of Oceanian states in the face of economic development or, more recently, of climate change (Hau’ofa, 1994, p. 151). Adopting a similar critical posture, Uma Kothari argued during the COST workshop “Race, affect and alterity: Rethinking climate change and migration” in Durham in June 2013 that such representations could be linked to colonial and racialised narratives of islands.

## Seeing space differently: Territorial networks and the South Pacific

In “Island Movements: thinking with the Archipelago”, Jonathan Pugh showed that in the 1990s and 2000s, “new spatial ontologies” led to “increasing attention being given to tropes such as ‘networks’” (Pugh, 2013, p. 13). When applied to geography, networks define space as a set of relations (links) between distant places (nods). But such relations are not neutral or simply factual interactions, as spatial networks are embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts. Bernard Debarbieux (1999) showed how in French speaking social sciences and in geography in particular, the concept of territory is often mobilized to explore such contexts, as a ‘territory’ is not only understood as an administrative unit but the result of the appropriation and identification of space by a social group through social political and cultural relations and structures. And as Di Méo points it, a territory can take the form of a contiguous area or of a network in a topological metric (Di Méo, 2002, pp. 178-179). Hence, a territorial network can be defined as the interactions between several distant territories or the identification and appropriation of these interactions themselves by a social group. With this concept, we can look at the South Pacific region not just as a juxtaposition of individualised and discontinuous surfaces (i.e. islands, continents and ocean) but as a socially and politically constructed and experienced multiscale set of relations between islands for instance.

Many concepts and ideas used by social scientists, Pacific leaders and inhabitants already mobilise, explicitly or not, the framework of territorial networks in the fields of island and/or Pacific studies.

Several theoretical tools exist to try and capture inter-islands territorial networks. A classic instance is the concept of archipelago. Based on his research on the Açores, Louis Marrou defined it in 2005 as a system of geographic, historical and cultural relations between several oceanic islands (Marrou, 2005). Elaine Stratford argued that this concept allows us to see that “island relations are built on connection, assemblage, mobility, and multiplicity”, which “create spaces for growing resilience, association and engagement” (Stratford, 2013, p. 3). French Polynesia is for instance generally described as a group of five archipelagos (The Society islands, The Tuamotu, The Australes islands, The Gambier and The Marquesas) interconnected spatially – by plane and cargo routes such as The Aranui 3 (which circles between Fakarava and Rangiroa in the Tuamotu and the Marquesas) – and politically, as a ‘Country’ within the French Republic. At a different scalar level, French Polynesia is part of what is often called the ‘Polynesian triangle’ which includes the islands lying between Aotearoa / New Zealand, Rapa Nui / Easter Island and Hawai’i. As Barcham, Scheyvens and Overton describe it, this concept was forged by Europeans to gain a representation of “[...] the extent of the Polynesian settlement of the islands of the Pacific [...]” and the “[m]ovement, often over long distances, [that] has characterised the history of Polynesian peoples” (Barcahm et al, 2009, p. 322).

Movements in the Polynesian triangle included for instance religious mobility toward the common religious centre of Raiatea (Society Islands). Interestingly, two years ago this historical network became politically institutionalised through the establishment of the Polynesian Leaders Group.

In this first part I tried to explain why representations of island space should not be solely approached as a number of single entities but as multi-scalar and intertwined territorial networks. I will now try to show what this conceptual framework could bring for the study of the climate change and migration paradigm in the South Pacific.

### 3. Analysing the climate change and migration nexus with the concept of territorial networks in the South Pacific

Two different geo-imaginaries of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) currently coexist. Figure one is a banner for the 2014 UN SIDS Conference. It features both a tiny isolated islet – which echoes the single palm tree standing alone on Figure 2 – and a circle surrounding several linked dots. The first component is very common in climate change narratives as a symbol of vulnerability. However, the Samoa conference was centered on partnerships, as illustrated with this circle. The Alliance for Small Islands States, that was established in 1990, is in fact a worldwide network of islands, as shown on the map below.



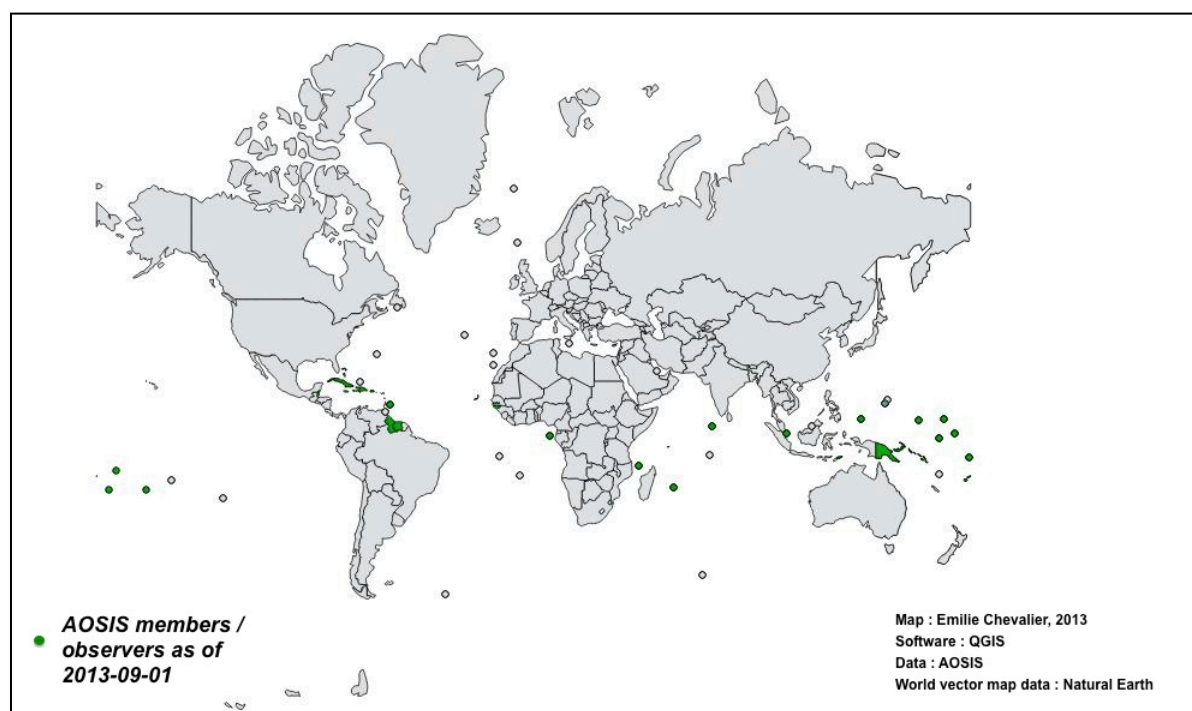
**Figure 1. Ambivalent geo-imaginaries of islandness.**

Source : SIDS Policy and Practice, IISD Reporting Services, « Chairs Summarize Six Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Dialogues on SIDS », October 8, 2014 (website visited on November 21, 2014). <http://sids-1.iisd.org/news/chairs-summarize-six-multi-stakeholder-partnership-dialogues-on-sids/>





**Figure 2. Representing the AOSIS : isolation and/or partnerships ?** One of the AOSIS'logos. Source : SIDS Policy and Practice, IISD Reporting Services, « AOSIS prepares for Lima », November 12, 2014 (website visited on November 21, 2014). <http://sids-l.iisd.org/news/aosis-prepares-for-lima/>



**Map 1: Members of the Alliance of Small Island States**

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The AOSIS network is largely involved in discussions around climate-induced migration. In his opening address to the Nansen Pacific Consultation on Human Mobility, Natural Disasters and Climate Change (Rarotonga, 21-24 May 2013), Hon. Henri Puna, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands spoke about the “Long history of warm relations [...]” between his country and Nauru, the current chair of AOSIS, and of the fact that they are “very close collaborators and partners in terms of helping to drive the Small Islands Developing State agenda” and thanked Nauru's President for “demonstrating a strong interest” in a meeting held to “move forward on this discussion” and “strengthen our collective

Pacific voice”<sup>15</sup>. From this statement, it appears that the government of the Cook Islands and Nauru worked in close connection and aimed at being instrumental actors in the emergence of the topic of climate change-induced human mobility on the international political agenda.

This example shows that the AOSIS can be seen as a territorial network in the sense that it aims at creating a common, relational sense of place. As an organization meant to obtain resources for its members, AOSIS is linked with international politics and power issues. The example also demonstrates that climate change and the CCMN are paradigms that were born on the international arena and that circulate and are renegotiated through the translocal interactions of actors. Thus, identifying and analysing territorial networks could help us understand the dynamics and rationale of the climate change and migration paradigm could help us understand in the South Pacific in three ways.

First, analysing territorial networks in the South Pacific provides an understanding of the spatial context within which adaptation and migration strategies are built. As part of my earlier work (Chevalier, 2010 & 2012) on the impacts of climate variability and change on out-migration in Tuvalu, I showed that environmental constraints – when mentioned – are integrated into a broader set of mobility factors. For instance, a young mother told me that she wanted to leave Tuvalu for the United States since she wanted a higher standard of living for her daughter and that they would obtain a visa since his family was from American Samoa. Furthermore, the specificity of climate-induced migrations lies in the anticipated nature of environmental changes that requires people to factor prospective information from various global, regional and local sources. Another young woman answered that her aunt had migrated to New Zealand and was telling her that Tuvalu was threatened by sea-level rise, suggesting her to join her in Auckland. As we can see from this example, people interacting with migrants, potential or non-migrants intervene in the construction of the island and mobility narratives with regard to climate change. Thus, as Patrick Sakdapolrak explained it in his presentation at the Bielefeld conference on Social Inequalities in Environmentally-Induced Migration in December 2012, “[c]onceptualizing the environmental impact of migration in sending areas [...] would be enriched by ‘trans-local perspectives’”. Combining an analysis of mobility factors and trans-local perspectives can already be conceptualized through theoretical frameworks that analyse territorial networks. At the international level, theoretical frameworks such as transnational spaces, migratory fields or diasporas have already been explored by several researchers (Mortreux &

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<sup>15</sup> Nansen Initiative, & Hon. Prime Minister Henri Puna. (2013). Opening Address. Presented at the Nansen Pacific Regional Consultation “Human mobility, natural disasters and climate change in the Pacific”, Rarontonga, Cook Islands. Retrieved from : [http://www.nanseninitiative.org/sites/default/files/Nansen%20Initiative%20Pacific%20Consultation%20Opening%20Address%20H.E.%20Henry%20Puna\\_0.pdf](http://www.nanseninitiative.org/sites/default/files/Nansen%20Initiative%20Pacific%20Consultation%20Opening%20Address%20H.E.%20Henry%20Puna_0.pdf)

Barnett, 2009; Gemenne, 2010) to analyse for instance processes and impacts of information and resource circulation on population movements as well as of the evolving sense of place in a mobility context in the South Pacific. However, the links between research on the climate change and migration nexus and migration and mobility studies as well as trans-local approaches seem so far limited. Most research on the former seem to adopt an asymmetrical and dialectical approach and focus on designated sending areas through the frameworks of risk and disasters, sustainability, vulnerability and resilience or adaptation and are clearly separated from designated receiving areas that are studied in terms of legal and political openness to climate-induced migration.

Secondly, discourses on climate change and migration can mirror and/or be mobilised to reshape the dynamics of continuities and ruptures that structure territorial networks in the South Pacific. The case of the relations between Australia, New Zealand, Kiribati and Tuvalu concerning climate change and migration illustrate the complex dynamics of the North / South divide in the region. But beyond this highly mediatised divide, other continuities and discontinuities are to be examined. For instance, in 2010, the Tavana (Mayor) of Napuka, an atoll in the North Eastern part of the Tuamotu archipelago in French Polynesia made a plea to his fellow mayors at the Congress of Municipalities (*Congrès des Communes*) in relation to climate change impacts. According to the local newspaper *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti*<sup>16</sup>, Taurai Puarai stressed the challenges of economic development for his atoll due to the remoteness of the island, challenges that would become exacerbated by sea-level rise. The journal then explains that Taurai Puarai sent a letter to the Mayors of the Marquesas to ask for the possibility of relocating his population there in the eventuality of Napuka being submerged, given the fact that the Marquesas are “considerably bigger and higher” and that they share “ties of friendship”.

Three comments can be made on this case. Firstly, local mobilities within an atoll, between islands, archipelagos or between island states are alternative solutions to relocating populations to capital cities, Australia or New Zealand. As such they can be analysed either as forms of inter-island continuities and complementarities or as sources of conflict, potentially caused by the crossing of cultural, social, political, administrative or economic boundaries. Secondly, it demonstrates how local actors can mobilise narratives of political or cultural ties, i.e. of territorial networks as a tool in the context of climate change. This second dimension seems to be highly present in the Pacific. The Pacific Conference of Churches as well as the Fiji based journal “Islands business” have communicated several times on the necessity to build and/or resuscitate an Oceanian solidarity in

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<sup>16</sup> Les Nouvelles de Tahiti (2010). Napuka cherche terre d'accueil. Retrieved from <http://www.lesnouvelles.pf/article/lactu-politique-du-fenua/napuka-cherche-terre-d'accueil>

the face of climate change. In the end it illustrates the fact that development and climate challenges and solutions can be defined in a relational way.

Finally, studying the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific allows an analysis of the hierarchies and inequalities that can be found between different actors and places. Indeed, since the concept postulates a socialisation of space, it involves dynamics of actors. In this context, the degree of international visibility and/or capability of any particular political entity or social group with regard to the climate-induced migration issue may alter the dynamics of resource and power allocation as well as the hierarchies within networks, as it is already the case with the emphasis on low-lying coastal areas over highlands, or with migrants over non-migrants in the Pacific. Two newspaper articles can illustrate the political dimensions of these dynamics. On the one hand, in May 2013, Moana Carcasses Kalosil, Vanuatu's Prime Minister announced that the country could take in climate refugees. Following this announcement, a journalist for Radio Australia, Pierre Riant, interviewed Kalkot Mormor, former president of the Vaturisu Efate (Council of chiefs)<sup>17</sup>. He stated that due to land scarcity on Efate (the island where Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, is located) he did not agree with this proposal and that the prime minister should have consulted with the councils of chiefs beforehand. This article underlines the multi-scalar relations of power that structure the territorial structure of Vanuatu.

#### 4. Conclusion

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Perceptions and narratives of island space and the impacts on policy making and identity formation have been an ongoing debate in the South Pacific since the 1980s and the accession to independence for many island states. This debate is reflected in Hau'ofa's dialectical analysis of the two “levels of operation” in Oceania: on the one hand the one of national governments, regional and international diplomacy and the other hand the one of “ordinary people, peasants and proletarians” (Hau'ofa, 1994, p. 148) or the Vast ocean states versus Small Island states debate.

During the Durham COST Workshop mentioned earlier, David Goldberg (University of California, Irvine) gave a keynote speech, “Parting Waters: Seas of Movement”, in which he called for a relational approach of places in the context of climate change. In this paper I tried to illustrate the potential benefits of such an approach through the framework of territorial networks. This approach can help reveal processes through which climate change related discourses and practices mobilise or reshape territories and a sense of place.

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<sup>17</sup> Radio Australia (2013). *Efate affiche complet pour les réfugiés du changement climatique*. Retrieved from <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/french/2013-05-30/efate-affiche-complet-pour-les-refugiés-du-changement-climatique/1138310>

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# The discourse about legal protection for environmental refugees: Re-constructing categories – rethinking policies

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*Marlene Becker*

## 1. Introduction

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The impact of climate change on migration patterns has attracted much attention in recent years. It is generally assumed that the consequences of global warming, respectively environmental change will force more and more people throughout the world to move. A variety of actors have therefore called for an international protection regime on climate change displacement and an ongoing debate exists among UN bodies and agencies, governments, academics, international organizations and NGOs on how to protect and react to 'environmental refugees'. The academic community has divided opinions about the numbers of displaced persons in this scenario, but it seems that there is minimal consensus that the number will increase. Despite this uncertainty, the picture of millions of climate refugees emerges constantly in the media or in annual disaster reports (BBC, 2013; EurAktiv, 2013).

Numbers have an important effect and are an essential part in the discourses about migration in general; different actors use and interpret the numbers depending on their own strategic interest. For environmental organizations the picture of 'millions of climate refugees' is useful to draw attention to climate change issues, meanwhile politicians can use these numbers to legitimize restrictive migration measures. Although the policy debate lags considerably behind the academic discussions, 'environmental migration' has become a contemporary issue at the policy level (cf. European Parliament 2011, p.9). Several actors support initiatives to promote a new convention or international standards for 'environmental refugees' (Biermann & Boas, 2007; Docherty & Giannini, 2009; Nansen Initiative), while others developed an approach based on existing instruments under international/European law (Kolmannskog, 2008), such as seeking to expand the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. During the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, finance minister of Bangladesh, stated in regard to 'climate refugees': "The convention on refugees could be revised to protect people. It's been through other revisions, so it should be possible" (Grant et al., 2009). He called on Britain and other countries to "[...] accept millions of displaced people" (Grant et al., 2009). Jean-Francois Durieux, member of the

UN Refugee Agency, responded during the conference: “The climate in Europe, North America and Australia is not conducive to a relaxed debate about increasing migration. There is a worry doors will shut if we start that discussion” (Grant et al., 2009). Obviously the suggestion to expand existing migration regimes or the international refugee regime due to climate change (or any other reason) is a controversial political topic. It is therefore essential to include the political context and discourses of migration and asylum policies into the current climate migration debate. In regard to Europe, recent trends and discourses incline towards raising barriers and to introduce restrictive migration and asylum laws, rather than to open up a new category for climate refugees.

In the following, different labels will be discussed in order to approach the discourse around ‘environmental migration’. Two questions will be further investigated. First, what constitutes a refugee and what is the policy towards migrants and refugees? Second, what perspective can the humanities add to the discourse on a legal framework on environmental refugees?

## 2. Making a Refugee

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Two policy areas are particularly concerned with environmental migration, namely migration/refugee policies and environmental policies. Whereby the concept emerged on the environmental/climate change policy agenda, migration policies were long blind to environmental migration (cf. Gemenne, 2011, p. 242). When asking how to protect environmental refugees, the general question is what constitutes the policies towards migrants and refugees. This is an important aspect, especially as the issue is increasingly integrated in the global migration dialogue, in particular in the Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD) or the Global Approach on Migration and Mobility by the European Union (GAMM).

Through policies, the individual is categorized and given statues and roles as a ‘refugee’. Hereby, asylum policy claims to regulate migration through norms of international law and human rights standards. The current understanding of a refugee is shaped by human rights policies that have been laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Geneva Convention, but this notion of a refugee is highly selective in both a historical and a contemporary context (cf. Scherschel, 2011a, p. 74). The adoption of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees was a long process and was created to suit the needs of post World War II Europe. It remains the key legal document in defining who is a refugee and does not include environmental factors:

*[...] a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the*



*country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it* (UNHCR, 1951, p. 3).

This highly selective notion of a refugee triggered an ongoing debate about the actuality of the convention. The mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) depends upon the range of the definition laid down in the Geneva Convention and it thus attempts to draw a sharp line between refugees and migrants. Humanitarian assistance is offered only to those who qualify for a refugee status in the terms of the Geneva Convention.

Migration scholars problematize the extent to which it is possible to distinguish clearly between refugees and other types of migrants. It is argued that the distinction between migrants and refugees does not picture the way migratory processes work and take place in the real world. As Malkki has noted, “involuntary or forced movements of people are always only one aspect of much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices” (Malkki, 1995, p. 496). Roger Zetter, professor of refugee studies, argues that labelling someone a refugee is a powerful process, by which policy agendas are established and people are conceived of as objects of policy (Zetter, 2007). Zetter states that labels are the tangible representation of policies and programs, in which labels are not only formed but also transformed by bureaucratic processes which institutionalize and differentiate categories (cf. Zetter, 2007, p. 180). Nonetheless, labelling people as migrant, as illegal or as refugee is essential on a policy level and in the legal sphere. It even affects the mandates of international humanitarian agencies or non-governmental organizations. This became clear in the position of the UNHCR in the debate of how to label environmental refugees. International actors like the UNHCR disagree with the term ‘environmental refugee’, because of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. UNHCR promotes terms like climate migration or climate induced displacement (cf. UNHCR, 2008). They have a particularly far-reaching impact, because a migrant is not an object of legal obligations like a refugee. A refugee is protected against ‘refoulement’ and has – at least theoretically – certain rights (cf. Oels, 2008).

The UNHCR is an important actor in the *knowledge production of environmental migration*. UNHCR has organized a number of conferences and policy forums about climate change and migration and is publishing widely on the topic.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in the scientific debate on the environmental migration nexus, hardly any reflection about organizations like the UNHCR takes place.<sup>19</sup> UNHCR, as an

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<sup>18</sup> An overview of the activities of the UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4a5096.html>, accessed 27.02.2014

<sup>19</sup> An interesting paper which is dealing with the role of the UNHCR has been written by Hall, N. (2013).

intergovernmental organization, is funded by the member states and mandated to provide services to the states. Chmini suggests that in order to analyse the operation of international organizations, we need to understand them as located within a larger social order, particularly the historical and political contexts in which they originate and function. Such an approach contends that only when a coalition of powerful states perceives that an international organization is the appropriate form to defend their interests, is it brought into existence and continues this function (cf. Chmini, 1998, p. 366). Moreover in the migration and border studies, there are interesting approaches dealing with the role of international organizations in the field of migration management and how they are a part of the governing of migration by nation states – Scheel and Ratfisch (2014) analyse the role of the UNHCR; Georgi and Schatral (2012) focus on the International Organization for Migration. This background should be taken into account, because international organizations like the UNHCR, IOM or ICMPD are important players in the knowledge production within the environment/climate change migration nexus.

### **3. What can the humanities add to the discourse?**

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The humanities can help to re-conceptualize the research field. As outlined above with the example of the UNCHR, the humanities can bring light on the specific context and conditions of knowledge production within the field of environmental migration. They can bring light on the discursive processes by which the ‘environmental refugee’ has been created. Re-conceptualizing the research field means to understand the framing of a problem like the ‘environmental refugee’ not just as a linear process of problem identification, formulation of solutions, and implementation. Instead of simplifying these processes by rational choice approaches, the focus should be on the complexity and messiness of these processes, for example by asking how and through which actors and interests the legal protection of ‘environmental refugees’ became the subject of political negotiations (cf. Shore & Wright, 1997). The massive efforts in terms of knowledge production on environmental migration pursued by international governmental organizations (IGOs like the UNHCR) on behalf of the European policy institutions or national parliaments shows that framing the phenomenon is a highly politicized process.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, insurance companies support research on the topic, for example AXA.<sup>21</sup> These policy and commercial concerns within the field have far reaching impacts on the research itself. Most work that studies environmental migration, as well as refugee studies in general tend to understand the existence of ‘the refugee’ as a problem in contrast to the ‘normal’ rooted

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<sup>20</sup> For example the ICMPD, 2012, study based on a recent study commissioned by the European Parliament tasked to examine the legal and policy aspects of climate change and migration.

<sup>21</sup> AXA supported inter alia the “Where the rain falls project”:

[http://i.unu.edu/media/unu.edu/publication/31459/WTRF\\_Global\\_Policy\\_Report\\_smaller.pdf](http://i.unu.edu/media/unu.edu/publication/31459/WTRF_Global_Policy_Report_smaller.pdf), accessed 27.02.2014

citizen. The international context in which refugees emerge as a 'problem' is thereby not questioned (cf. Hammad, 2008). In migration studies, legal definitions have been the subject of critique. There is an ongoing debate about the dependency of refugee studies on policy definitions and concerns (cf. Black, 2001a; cf. Zetter, 2007). This debate must be reflected in the context of the discourse around environmental change and migration. Starting point can be to understand the 'refugee' not as an unchangeable classification expressing a universal, enduring condition. Karin Scherschel suggests that "[a] refugee is not a set category expressing a universal and timeless definition; it is a relational one reflecting the outcome of social negotiations" (Scherschel, 2011a, p. 74). The challenge is not to simply adopt the definitions of the international refugee regime to the scientific analysis, but to consider the political and social context of asylum policies in possible host countries and to trace the historical origin of the label 'refugee'. The label is a political classification. It is the result of historical developments, social perceptions and discourses and has powerful effects (cf. Scherschel, 2011a). These categories are a part of the governing of migration by nation states – and therefore highly politicized. Yet, within legal discourses and research on climate refugees, critical comments on the practice of the current refugee regime are largely missing. Angelika Oels opens up this perspective: she refers to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* to question the benefits of refugee status and draws a connection to the current European border regime (cf. Oels, 2008). In refugee studies and in critical migration studies, the uncritical use of policy-based definitions has been a constant concern. These findings should be integrated in the analysis of environmental migration. An ongoing debate in the refugee centres around this relatively uncritical use of policy based definitions which has a long history. Black states that it contributes to the perception of the naturalness of categories like the 'refugee' and of differential policies towards those who do and those who do not qualify for the label (cf. Black 2001a, p. 63). Black describes the research on environmental migration as:

*[...] based less on theoretical reflection about what constitutes a refugee, or a conceptually coherent field of study, and more on the documentation of empirical examples of displacement, often led by researchers based within policy organizations that are directly concerned with responding to (or even causing) particular types of displacement* (Black, 2001a, p. 65).

Black's critique remains almost unheard. The consequence is that the dominance of policy concerns leads to an under-theorized research field which is mostly orientated towards particular bureaucratic interests (cf. Black, 2001a, p. 67). Here, also the work of Chmini should get attention. He is a legal scholar who works on the knowledge production in the field of refugee studies. He states that refugee studies have served the geopolitics of hegemonic states and underlines that the principal *locus of knowledge production* remains in academic institutions in the global North or in international governmental and non-governmental organizations dominated by northern interests (cf. Chmini, 2009, p. 18).

#### 4. Conclusion: Re-constructing categories – Re-thinking policies

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The humanities can help to re-conceptualize the research field. They can bring light on the specific context and conditions of knowledge production within the field of environmental migration. The paper elaborated on the idea of *making a refugee* and put light on labelling processes. Labelling processes involve relationships of power. Powerful actors establish and use labels to influence how to understand and frame a problem which reflects how issues are represented (or not represented) in policy debates and discourse (cf. Moncrieffe, 2007). There is an ongoing debate about the dependency of refugee studies on policy definitions and the dilemma between “scholarship and advocacy” (cf. Van Hear, 1998; Scalettari, 2007). Refugee studies, critical migration studies and border studies can add interesting perspectives on the topic and can help to open up new research questions like “who is perceived as *desired refugee* and who not with what effect?” They can help to analyze climate migration policies against the background of the category construction related to migration policies and can point out the hierarchisation of migration in desirable and undesirable migration (cf. Müller, 2010). They can help to analyze the massive knowledge-production strategies by international government organizations like UNHCR. These debates should be considered in the context of the discourse around environmental change and migration. The figure of the environmental refugee is part of a broader development; migration is increasingly problematized as a condition in need of regulation and control. The question is under what conditions and with what effect labels are created and whose labels prevail in defining a whole situation or policy area (Wood, 1985, p.349) – a codification which should be integrated into the analysis of environmental migration.

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## Comment

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The paper “The discourse about a legal protection regime for environmental refugees: Reconstructing categories – rethinking policies” by Marlene Becker focusses on an important aspect in the international debates on climate change and migration: the way of how the category of ‘refugee’ comes into being and unfolds effectiveness. To uncover these “labelling processes”, as the author puts it, is central to denaturalizing climate change-induced migration as phenomenon. By uncovering the UNHCR as main actor in this process, she is able to shed light on the role of the international community within the discourse of climate-induced migration.

Nonetheless, the paper would have profited from clearly focussing on this labeling processes and on tracing the actors involved. Instead, the author tries to include the figure of the migrant to show the relational character of the labels and to formulate a research program for the humanities. Addressing just one of these aspects in detail would have been sufficient to show something very important for denaturalizing climate change: how categories come into being and affect both concrete policies and individuals.

Additionally, it would be fruitful for prospective research to combine this approach with Michel Foucault's understanding of ‘discourse’. To him, discourses shape, among other things, societal and individual actions, beliefs, and norms. By showing how the refugee as category comes into being and affects both concrete strategies and the so-labelled individuals, Becker describes something similar: the impact of political and, more concealed, societal discourses and individuals’ lives – in Foucault’s terms, she describes the strategies and effectiveness of the hegemonic discourse in today’s world society.